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## ‘Dans le manicomie du crâne et nulle part ailleurs:’ Confinement and Confusion in *Mal vu mal dit* (1981)

Adam Watt

### ABSTRACT

Beckett’s late “closed space” works are characterized by the experience of confinement. This article revisits *Mal vu mal dit* (1981), focusing on two dimensions of the text that have characterized experiences of the current pandemic: confinement and confusion. I explore these notions and their productive co-existence in the text: firstly, the experience of the enclosed, disturbing spaces of the cabin that are repeatedly described, as well as the mental space from which narration emerges, the “manicomie du crâne” or madhouse of the skull. Secondly, I consider the disorderly mingling of past and present, reality and imaginary, perception and language, that structures the text and characterizes our engagement with it. The austere picture of existence that emerges is tempered by poetic patterning and allusion that point to a (literary) possibility of solace beyond the brutality of the present. The radical challenges posed by this writing mean that it cannot represent a sustainable “new normal” for narrative fiction. Nevertheless, drawing on Beckett’s letters and informed by Milan Kundera and others, my reading proposes ways in which the confinement and confusion of *Mal vu mal dit* intensify our engagement with the processes and possibilities of narrative practice.

**KEYWORDS** Beckett; *Mal vu mal dit*; confinement; confusion; narrative practice

Beckett is a peerless writer of enclosure. Containment, constriction and limitation in his writings have long interested critics. Reading Beckett tends to be tinged with challenge, pleasure, an awareness of pain, uncertainty. Re-reading him under our recent regime of pandemic-enforced confinement felt like a risky undertaking but one that offered the possibility of new insights prompted by those very conditions of reading. I decided to explore the themes of confinement and confusion in *Mal vu mal dit* (1981) partly because they leapt out at me on rereading the text, partly because they seemed well suited to our own present moment. The

choice was also prompted by the theme of the 2021 Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium, “A New Normal?” *Mal vu* is a radical challenge to prose narrative, a text that strains our interpretive capacities, resists the frameworks we typically rely on when making sense of narrative fiction. It is what Barthes would have called a “texte scriptible” or *writerly* text (Barthes 10), one which makes readers work extremely hard. It isn’t a sustainable “new normal” for narrative fiction, but it is a text whose foregrounding of the experience of confinement and confusion makes it apt for exploration at this time. And as it is not treated in James Little’s recent monograph, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement: The Politics of Closed Space* (2020),<sup>1</sup> it seemed ripe for consideration.

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*Mal vu mal dit* is just under seventy pages long, written between October 1979 and December 1980 and published in May 1981. James Knowlson describes it as a “meticulously woven tapestry of words [...] best read as an exquisite prose poem” depicting “a haunting desolate world in which mystery and ambiguity are dominant” (Knowlson 668; 670). Knowlson offers a succinct sketch of the work:

A narrator recounts the fable of a woman, dressed in black, who lives alone in a cabin in a zone of stones. She is surrounded by an enigmatic group of twelve indistinct figures, a number which recalls the Apostles or the signs of the Zodiac, but whose significance is never explained. One of the major events is a regular visit that she makes to a white tombstone. The woman herself may be a ghost, a memory, or a fiction, or a mixture of all three. (668–669)

This summary, precise and unpartisan, underlines the enigmatic nature of *Mal vu*, a text, as its title suggests, of confusion and uncertainty. In a letter of February 1980, Beckett described it as sharing “much the same confusion of ‘reality’—the... counterpoison” as his earlier text *Company* (4: 523), wherein a man lies recumbent in the dark, wrestling with what can be understood of and by the “self,” his narrative successively referring to himself in the third and the second person: “Confusion too is company up to a point,” as the text has it (15). In *Mal vu* we don’t have direct access to the thoughts and experiences of the protagonist; rather the story, such as it is, is told by a narrator external to the stark scene.

My interest lies in the finely threaded details and motifs that shape and trouble our reading, the interplay of which make Knowlson’s characterization of the text as a “meticulously woven tapestry” most apposite. To speak of confinement and confusion in this text is to go to the heart of its form and content. The female protagonist is confined to spaces painstakingly delimited by the narrator, yet which remain strange and

uncertain (as Patrick McGuinness argues, “when you try to imagine yourself somewhere you don’t know and have never been, you can’t do it; your mind slides off the surface of the images you conjure up like a finger on wet glass” (McGuinness 17)). And the more we are immersed in this world, the more our confusion about what precisely we are witnessing grows. There is, moreover, an insistent, destabilizing mingling or confusion of past and present, reality and imaginary, perception and language, that structures the text and characterises our engagement with it.

Writers have long relied on coordinates of space and place to establish the world of their narrative fictions. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s much-read *Paul et Virginie* (1788), for instance, opens as follows:

Sur le côté oriental de la montagne qui s’élève derrière le Port-Louis de l’Île-de-France, on voit, dans un terrain jadis cultivé, les ruines de deux petites cabanes. Elles sont situées presque au milieu d’un bassin formé par de grands rochers, qui n’a qu’une seule ouverture tournée au nord. (Bernardin 7)

Notice the attention to the cardinal points, relationality in space, place-names, topographical features and temporal markers both explicit (“jadis”) and implicit (“les ruines”). By contrast, Beckett’s opening paragraph consists of the woman’s spatial perceptions as she looks at the sky: it opens “De sa couche elle voit se lever Vénus” (7), a phrase rendered in sing-song style in Beckett’s translation: “From where she lies she sees Venus rise” (43). We are told she is on her chair by the window, “comme changée en pierre face à la nuit” (8) [“as though turned to stone face to the night” (43)<sup>2</sup>]: already there is a sort of con-fusion, woman become stone in her act of observation. The stark contrast between Beckett’s approach and the more conventional narrative practice of Bernardin is evident in Beckett’s second paragraph: “Le cabanon. Son emplacement. Attention. Aller. Le cabanon. À l’inexistant centre d’un espace sans forme” (8–9) [“The cabin. Its situation. Careful. On. At the inexistent centre of a formless place” (44)]. Though Bernardin’s cabins may be in ruins, we have no doubt about their existence, location and spatial relation to the features of the Mauritian landscape around them. Beckett’s cabin, however, is presented as a placeless place, a construction of the mind. It is, in other words, a fictional space.

Much of the text concerns the ghostly actions of the woman who resides in the cabin. Like the reader, she too appears to seek understanding:

*Vite alors la vieille à peine remise du coucher de Vénus vite à l’autre fenêtre voit surgir l’autre merveille. Comme de plus en plus blanche à mesure qu’elle s’élève elle blanchit les cailloux de plus en plus. Raide debout*

visage et mains appuyés contre la vitre longuement elle s'émerveille. (10, my emphasis)

Quick then still under the spell of Venus quick to the other window to see the other marvel rise. How whiter and whiter as it climbs it whitens more and more the stones. Rigid with face and hands against the pane she stands and marvels long. (44)

These lines articulate an experience of interior and exterior, of multiple scales and speeds. They are inlaid with a series of echoes, mirrorings and repetitions, highlighted above, as between the initial pairing of Venus and the moon. We note subtle phonic variance between “vite alors” / “vite à l’autre;” echoes of specific terms: “vite,” “l’autre,” “de plus en plus;” “blanche” / “blanchit;” “merveille” / “s’émerveille;” and ambiguity of grammatical subject: the feminine singular in “elle s’élève elle blanchit les cailloux” designates “l’autre merveille,” not the protagonist. While the sense slowly coalesces, another form of con-fusion—the conjoining of sounds—seems to provide a poetic underpinning to the prose (in French and in English). And this is by no means limited to the passage cited. The text is threaded through with refrains and short phrases structured around simple sound patterns: “Hiver elle erre chez elle l’hiver” (18) [“Winter in her winter haunts she wanders” (48)]; “Et comme lentement alentour la trace de ses pas s’efface” (19) [“And how all about little by little her footprints are effaced” (48)]. As we question what we are witnessing, a stark answer is proffered: “C’est la vie qui finit” (19), yet as life fizzles out, a vital glimmer remains in the singsong assonance of the phrase (not quite captured in the English “What but life ending” [48]).

The bulk of the text is in the present tense, but in the opening paragraph the narrator draws attention to this, stripping out any certainty it might provide: “Tout cela au présent,” we read: “Comme si elle avait le malheur d’être encore en vie” (8) [“All this in the present as had she the misfortune to be still of this world” (44)]. We cannot be sure if the events are remembered, imagined or some combination of the two. In his essay *Le Rideau*, Milan Kundera suggests that we are separated from the past by two forces: “la force de l’oubli (qui efface) et la force de la mémoire (qui transforme)” (Kundera 180–181). *Mal vu* has an ambiguous relation to the past, and narrator and reader alike are constantly in thrall to these forces: our reading is characterized by encounters with echoes and refrains that may remind us of (or confuse us about) what came before. Kundera’s notion of fiction as a practice that can tear through the curtain of preconceptions that prevents us from apprehending reality is apt here, since in *Mal vu* it is repeatedly question of the “rideau” that the old woman pulls back and forth to reveal or conceal what lies beyond her window.

Within the confines of the cabin and of the story, all becomes entangled and uncertain:

Déjà tout s'emmêle. Choses et chimères. Comme de tout temps. S'emmêle et s'annule. Malgré les précautions. Si seulement elle pouvait n'être qu'ombre. Ombre sans mélange. Cette vieille si mourante. Si morte. Dans le manicomie du crâne et nulle part ailleurs. Où plus de précautions à prendre. Plus de précautions possibles. Internée là avec le reste. Cabanon caillasse et tout le bazar. Et le guetteur. Comme tout serait simple alors. Si tout pouvait n'être qu'ombre. Ni être ni avoir été ni pouvoir être. Du calme. La suite. Attention. (24)

Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always. Confusion amounting to nothing. Despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. Where no more precautions to be taken. No precautions possible. Cooped up there with the rest. Hovel and stones. The lot. And the eye. How simple all then. If only all could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be. Gently gently. On. Careful. (51)

This powerful passage frames the travails of narrative and the battle between “mémoire” and “oubli.” If only the protagonist were but a figment, confined within the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. The choice of words here is intriguing: “manicomie” is not a widely accepted word in French: absent from the *Trésor de la langue française* and the Larousse, it does appear, as Shane Weller has remarked, in *Littré*, with the sense ‘un hôpital d’aliénés’ (Weller 45). *Manicomio* is more common in Italian, meaning “asylum” or, archaically, “madhouse,” deriving from the Greek: *mania* = madness, *komein* = to care for. Envisaging the mind as the site and engine of storytelling is not new, but to characterize that creative space so directly as a “madhouse” reveals the underlying desperation of this text.<sup>3</sup> In Beckett’s poem “hors crâne seul dedans” (1976) the line “crâne abri dernier” (201) [“skull last refuge,” my translation] suggests something more comforting, while the troubling closed space of the mind figures as an important dimension of *Company* (1979) and, amongst others, the novella “Le Calmant,” written in 1946. There we read “nous sommes, bien entendu, dans une tête” (57), which Beckett’s own translation renders as “we are needless to say in a skull” (57). These thematics merge in *Mal vu* and arrive at that gentle closure: “Du calme. La suite. Attention.”

We might see the earlier image of the woman’s movement between her windows to see the moon rising as a wry reworking of the scene of the youthful protagonist in Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* darting between the windows of his railway carriage, seeking to piece together a vision of the sunrise over Balbec. The word “calme” as it returns, following the passage just quoted, brings another intertextual allusion and a

reminder of death in all its other-worldly stoniness. The woman gazes out, looking East: “À la faible lumière que renvoie la dalle. Calme bloc doucement concave poli par des siècles d’allées et venues” (30) [“In the dim light reflected by the flag. Calm slab worn and polished by agelong comings and goings” (54)]. These lines recall Mallarmé’s evocation of Poe’s tombstone: “Calme bloc ici-bas chu d’un désastre obscur / Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais sa borne” (Mallarmé 38).

In a letter of November 1960 Beckett quotes the first line of Mallarmé’s French here to Barbara Bray, explaining he had “recuperated it” into a work in progress, that would become *Comment c’est* (3: 371). The “recuperation” appears to have stretched to this much later text too.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, stoniness, from the “caillasse” and “cailloux” [scree and stones] to the standing stones and the slabs under the protagonist’s feet, is a major preoccupation of the text. Confinement, over time, it is suggested, leads to a sort of con-fusion or petrification, a becoming-stone:

Calme de vide ce soir comme toujours. Soir et nuit. Il n’est que de fixer l’herbe. Comme elle ploie immobile. Jusqu’au moment où sous l’œil qui s’acharne elle frissonne. D’un frisson infime venu de son profond. De même les cheveux. Dressés immobiles ils frémissent enfin sous l’œil au bord de l’abandon. Et le vieux corps lui-même. Lorsqu’il paraît en pierre. Ne frémit-il pas en fait de la tête aux pieds ? Qu’elle aille seulement se figer auprès de l’autre pierre. Celle dressée blanche de loin dans les champs. (36)

A sense of this fusion is intensified by Beckett’s use of pronouns and choice of verbs. “Comme elle ploie immobile” refers to “l’herbe,” but the feminine singular associatively recalls the protagonist. Under scrutiny the grass appears to shiver as does the woman’s hair. And her shiver, that of a body long confined then emerging into the evening air, is all that distinguishes her from the standing stone she visits, “celle dressée blanche [...] dans les champs.” This is life, but only just. Brief phrases undercut any narrative certainty we may seek, for instance “voilà que l’image s’embue” (40) [“before the eye has time they mist” (58)]; “Surtout ne pas comprendre” (53) [“Above all not understand” (63)] is a gnomic imperative a little later; and finally the tragi-comic observation: “Seule certitude la brume” (61) [“Haze sole certitude” (67)].

The last passage I will consider describes a new attitude of the woman, though where precisely she may be is unclear:

À la reprise la tête est sous la couverture. Cela ne fait rien. Plus rien. Tant il est vrai que réel et—comment dire le contraire ? Enfin ces deux-là. Tant vrai que les deux si deux jadis à présent se confondent. Et qu’au compère chargé du triste savoir l’œil ne signale plus guère que désarroi. Cela ne fait rien. Plus rien. Tant il est vrai que les deux sont mensonges. Réel et—comment mal dire le contraire ? Le contrepoison. (49–50)

On resumption the head is covered. No matter. No matter now. Such the confusion now between real and—how say its contrary? No matter. That old tandem. Such now the confusion between them once so twain. And such the farrago from eye to mind. For it to make what sad sense of it may. No matter now. Such equal liars both. Real and—how ill say its contrary? The counter-poison. (62)

The real and its opposite, normally distinct, now “se confondent,” they are con-fused, bonded. Yet Beckett’s hesitating syntax here, echoing the letter quoted earlier, invites readers to fill a gap: what in fact is the opposite of “le reel?” The imaginary? The dead? The answer proffered, “Le contrepoison,” implies that reality is noxious. What reigns now for whoever should try to understand the scene is “plus guère que désarroi”—that noun another term of confusion to add to the text’s spare yet emphatic lexical field. Beckett here toys with the ingredients of fiction, envisaging a scenario where the boundaries of reality and fiction are indeterminate.

We may find all this, especially read in confinement, overwhelming. There is no doubt that despite its brevity, *Mal vu* can have this effect. Yet repeatedly amidst the desolation it gives us something to hold on to: a glimpse of beauty beyond the darkness, via poetic sound patterning or the resonance of literary forebears such as Mallarmé and Proust. Hélène Cixous argues that Beckett should be read and interpreted “à deux tons au moins, en *ouf* de douleur et en *ouf* de soulagement” (Cixous 46). Our times of confinement have brought much pain and little solace; nevertheless they have occasioned a reading of *Mal vu mal dit* that is well attuned to its particular, desperate blend of these emotions. Writing of this sort cannot be a new normal, not in a sustained way: there’s a reason *Company* and *Mal vu* are each less than ninety pages long. Pascale Casanova argues that “à partir de *Comment c’est* (1960), puis avec ‘Imagination morte imaginez’ (1965), ‘Assez,’ ‘Bing’ (1966) et ‘Sans’ (1969), Beckett attaque les ‘conventions périmées’ de la littérature sur tous les fronts. Il déleste progressivement ses textes de tous les éléments externes qui pouvaient encore les rattacher à la tradition littéraire” (Casanova 143). This is unduly categorical. Alongside the manifold challenges it poses, as I have shown, *Mal vu* retains literary filiations. As it draws to its close, the narrator mentions that the cabin has a slate roof: “Petites ardoises noires elles aussi en provenance d’un manoir en ruine. Chargées d’histoire. Au bout de leur histoire. Voilà le logis mal vu mal dit” (54) [“Small slates black too brought from a ruined mansion. What tales had they tongues to tell. Their long tale told. Such the dwelling ill seen ill said” (64)]. The slates, a lexical reminder of early acts of writing, are “chargées d’histoire:” loaded with (hi-)story. The house of fiction may be in disrepair but much can still be seen from its windows.



## Notes

1. See James Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement: The Politics of Closed Space*, Camden, Bloomsbury, 2020.
2. The translations are from *Ill Seen Ill Said* in *Nohow On*, translated by Samuel Beckett in 1981 and published by Grove Press in 1996.
3. It might be read as a dark recasting of Montaigne's "arrière-boutique" or back-room where we can establish our real freedom in solitude (*Essais*, Book 1, Ch. 39 "On Solitude").
4. Within a wider discussion of Beckett's debts to Mallarmé, Serge Meitinger also picks up the allusion to the "Tombeau d'Edgar Poe" in *Mal vu mal dit*: see "La spirale de l'écriture, d'Igitur au dernier Beckett", *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 3 (1994), 97–114 (p. 108).

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## Notes on Contributor

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