
On the Freudian Motifs in Beckett's "First Love"

Paul O'Mahoney

Marino Institute of Education, Dublin

Copyright (c) 2013 by Paul O'Mahoney. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Abstract. Beckett's "First Love" is in part a literary experiment, being one of his first texts of length written in French. It is a story that is replete with allusions to Freudian psychoanalysis, both general ideas or theories and individual case studies. We argue here that its experimental status extends to this feature. Its incorporation of Freudian motifs represents the beginning of an attempt by Beckett to move beyond or improve upon his previous engagement with Freud in his fiction, with which he was somewhat dissatisfied. The change is signified in his parodic or unserious invocations of Freud, which differ from his earlier stories; while we concede that the approach is not very successful, in literary terms, in terms of Beckett's corpus and development as a writer it deserves attention. Having identified many of his Freudian sources and the character of his deployment of them, we note the difficulties his chosen approach presents for both writers and readers or interpreters. We close by pointing out the critical shortcomings that must follow on failure to attend to the story's essentially Freudian framework, exemplified in an essay on the story by Julia Kristeva.

Key Words: Samuel Beckett, "First Love", Freud, psychoanalysis, literary criticism

Resumen. "First Love" de Beckett es en parte un experimento literario, siendo uno de los primeros textos de cierta extensión que el autor escribió en francés. Se trata de una historia repleta de alusiones al psicoanálisis freudiano, tanto a nociones y teorías en general como a estudios de casos particulares. Aquí sostenemos que el carácter experimentalista se da también en este aspecto. La incorporación de motivos freudianos representa una intención por parte de Beckett de dar un paso más, o de mejorar, los vínculos con Freud que había establecido previamente en su ficción y de los cuales se sentía poco satisfecho. El cambio se advierte en las invocaciones paródicas o frívolas que hace a Freud y que difieren de las de los relatos anteriores; aun cuando reconocemos que la aproximación no siempre es exitosa en términos literarios, merece atención en el contexto de la obra de Beckett y de su evolución como escritor. Tras identificar muchas de las fuentes freudianas y el uso que hace de ellas, advertimos las dificultades que dichas aproximaciones suponen para escritores, lectores o intérpretes. Concluimos haciendo hincapié en las deficiencias críticas que resultan de no prestar atención al marco esencialmente freudiano del relato, ejemplificado en un ensayo de Julia Kristeva sobre dicho relato.

Palabras clave. Samuel Beckett, "First Love", Freud, psicoanálisis, teoría literaria

I.
A reader of Beckett's "First Love" who is somewhat familiar with the Freudian oeuvre will note immediately that the story plays with or deploys a number of Freudian psychoanalytic motifs, either borrowed from Freud's general studies or imported directly

from specific case histories. In what follows, we wish to set out some of those motifs, and discuss, on the one hand, the character of Beckett's deployment of them, which seems playful or parodic, and on the other, the problems this playful or parodic use of the motifs raises for the interpretation of the work

– particularly for any interpretation which fails to recognise them, and so take them into account.¹

“First Love” is in part a literary experiment. Its French original, “Premier Amour”, is one of the first original texts of length Beckett composed after his decision to shift language, a decision prompted by his desire to write, as he famously put it, “without style” (Knowlson 1997: 357). Writing in a non-native language, so we may conjecture from this comment, would effectively foreclose his inclinations toward excessively clever prose. Without passing judgement or reproach on his early output, one can well understand this; the stories of *More Pricks than Kicks*, for example, or the belatedly published template novel for some of its yarns, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, are for the most part sub-Joycean efforts, with only brief indications of the individual voice that would evolve in Beckett’s fiction once he retranslated his “styleless” French into highly stylised English – culminating in short, abstruse compositions like *Mal Vu Mal Dit*. Beckett’s shift to French takes him away from a writing that is not without awkwardness, occasionally prone to bad puns or verbosity, and above all yoked to Joyce, indeed the most difficult prick against which to kick. Knowlson recognises this obvious debt and summarises: “[Beckett’s] work in English throughout the 1930s bristled with erudite and literary allusions and what he called ‘Anglo-Irish exuberance and automatism’” (1997: 357).

Given this experimental status, it is not unreasonable to assume that not only the form or style but also the content of the story might have represented an effort on Beckett’s part to develop his fiction beyond certain themes or features which he felt had exhausted themselves. The presence of psychoanalytic motifs in Beckett’s work – perhaps most prominent in *Murphy* – does not disappear after

“Premier Amour”, resurfacing particularly in *Molloy* and the later “From an Abandoned Work”, but it does decline. What we suggest here is that Beckett had begun to recognise the limitations of this engagement with psychoanalysis for his fiction (it may have offered far less fertile opportunities than it seemed to promise), and his treatment of the Freudian motifs in the story reflects that recognition. In offering the motifs to the reader in a rather obvious, even unwieldy fashion, their deployment becomes essentially parodic. The story effectively plays a game of artificial psychodrama. It imports into the narrative various Freudian commonplaces, a ploy we might reasonably expect to offer keys or at least clues to the narrator’s psychic condition, and the grounds for his behaviour or compulsions. Elaborating such an interpretation, however, somehow feels unsatisfactory; in fact, deeply so. The blatant motifs, and the fact that Beckett makes no effort to hide some of his sources in the Freudian corpus, suggest that he himself was beginning to find this engagement with psychoanalysis, which was a feature not only of *Watt* and especially *Murphy* but also earlier, uncollected short stories, an unsatisfactory road. If Beckett in choosing French might be said to be writing against himself and his own worse inclinations as a writer of English, in parodying psychoanalytic ideas in the story he likewise works beyond another aspect or phase of his literary apprenticeship.

II.

Let us examine some of the motifs (there are many, and we may not have identified them all), and their sources in Freud. J.D. O’Hara’s classic study of Freudian themes in Beckett’s fiction, *Samuel Beckett’s Hidden Drives* (1997), offers a natural starting point, but identifies only a single source.² It is in this he partly locates the story’s failings – O’Hara calls it “a thoroughly disappointing return to depth psychology”, and indicates that it will get “short shrift” (1997: 72). He reckons Beckett’s initially withholding it from publication connected to his likely being “dissatisfied with

1. The fact that failure to recognise these motifs may impede understanding of the story has not precluded its being subjected to readings which draw it into other critical traditions which neglect its psychoanalytic themes. “First Love” has, for example, been quite famously read as a “postcolonial” text, in relatively pioneering fashion by David Lloyd, and later by Anna McMullan. See Lloyd (1989) and McMullan (2004).

2. Other psychoanalytic treatments of Beckett’s work include Baker (1997), Houppermans, Ed. (2004) and Gibson (2007). O’Hara’s is perhaps the most comprehensive, and the one to which we shall recur in discussion of “First Love”.

his attempts to infuse into the story structures and meanings from Freudian psychology”, and finds the dissatisfaction quite natural. “‘First Love’ is a poorly made story. One cause is his Freudian source. *Murphy* developed Freud’s general theories about narcissism, which afforded Beckett a complex structure. For ‘First Love,’ on the other hand, he turned to Freud’s report of a single case, ‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’ (1919), and that report is complicated, anecdotal, and not coherent” (ibid.: 74). This case has of course come to be popularly known as “The Wolf-Man”, owing to the patient’s (identified as Sergei Pankejeff) fear of wolves and the peculiar features of one of his dreams. It is certainly one of the most important reference points for “First Love” (Beckett 1995: 25–45; further references to the story will be in the body of the text), but not the sole source; the following are some of the correspondences between the “Wolf-Man” case history and the narrator of the story. Perhaps the first obvious nod is the narrator’s reference to his bowel movements. “One day, on my return from stool, I found my room locked and my belongings in a heap before the door. This will give you some idea how constipated I was, at this juncture. It was, I am now convinced, anxiety constipation. But was I genuinely constipated? Somehow I think not.” A few sentences after describing his straining at stool, he wonders: “What can that have been but constipation? Or am I confusing it with diarrhoea?” (28). This is lifted directly from the Wolf-Man’s experience, whose symptoms included alternating attacks of the two (Freud 1996: 232, 238). Pankejeff further demonstrated irrational paranoia about his mother’s handling of his inheritance, convinced he was not getting what was due to him (ibid.: 232), echoed in the narrator’s own suspicions about his family’s refusal to show him his father’s will – though these do not in his case stir him from his passivity (27–8). The two things are linked by Freud: the retention of faeces is a form of anal eroticism: “It is equally agreed that one of the most important manifestations of transformed erotism derived from this source is to be found in the treatment of money; for in the course of life this precious material attracts on to itself the psychical interest that was originally proper to faeces, the product of the anal zone” (Freud 1996: 230).

It was confirmed in the course of the Wolf-Man’s treatment that “for a long time before the analysis, faeces had had the significance of money for him” (ibid.: 232). This link is commonly made in analysis (cf. Ferenczi: 2003; Falzeder et al. 1993: 104, 178). The original interest in faeces is linked to the fact that it is the first “gift” the child can give or, in an act of resistance, withhold (Freud 1996: 239–40), and the infantile anal eroticism often results in the development of coprophilia (Falzeder et al. 1993: 359). The narrator of “First Love” clearly displays unresolved coprophilic impulses – he traces the name of Lulu in cowpats with his “devil’s finger” (apparently the forefinger), which he then sucks (34), and he later takes the stewpan furnished by Lulu-Anna as a chamber pot to bed with him (42). That these impulses are unresolved gives us some clue as to the parodic fashion in which they are invoked in the story; to anticipate ourselves slightly, we will presently see that the narrator’s psychic organisation has apparently prevented resolution, or “dissolution”, of an infantile castration complex – which ordinary dissolution is linked by Freud to the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. As O’Hara notes (1997: 71–2), *Murphy*’s neurosis seems to offer no hope of a cure; there is no resolution, no way for the narcissistic consciousness to overcome its difficulties and obtain some greater psychic peace, and it would seem much the same is the lot of the narrator of “First Love”.

We get a sense then of what Beckett is taking over from the “Wolf-Man” case history; but further on this point, as O’Hara notes: “[the] protagonist’s father requires consideration” (1997: 78). Freud had noted, as O’Hara says, his patient’s “obsessional piety”, which he linked to an attitude toward his father (ibid.: 78; Freud 1996: 258). O’Hara links the narrator’s destruction through neglect of the hyacinth (42, 44) to ambivalence toward the father (1997: 78), perhaps via his earlier, vague association of the hothouse containing hyacinths and tomatoes with his father (28). Freud had noted that faeces came to stand in for children. It was also determined in the course of analysis that the Wolf-Man had as a child interrupted parental intercourse by passing a stool, which gave him an excuse to scream (Freud 1996: 217, 239). This is connected, however, to his

intimacy that intercourse has a relation to the birth of children, and his jumping to the conclusion that a child is born via the anus. As regards the boy's father, with such considerations in mind (faeces as a gift, and representing a child, and the patient's constipation), Freud came to the conclusion, perhaps startling by any standards, that he harboured: "The wish to be born of his father ... to be sexually satisfied by him, the wish to present him with a child – and all of this at the price of his own masculinity, and expressed in the language of anal eroticism – these wishes complete the circle of his fixation upon his father" (O'Hara 1997: 79). This is further linked to the patient's feeling of being cut off from the world by a veil, which he himself linked to the information that he had been born with a caul. This "veil" disappeared only when, as a result of an enema, he passed a stool. The stool represents a child, and is connected to the fantasy of rebirth – the "tearing of the veil was analogous to the opening of his eyes and the opening of the window" (Freud 1996: 233, 258–60). O'Hara finds an "obvious" connection between this detail and the narrator's behaviour, tucked away in his one-windowed room with his chamber pot (1997: 77).

We have ample evidence for Beckett's reliance on the "Wolf-Man" case. If we were in any doubt as to this source having surveyed these connections, it is confirmed for us by Beckett in his narrator's unexplained decision to rename the object of his affection. Subsequent to his recollection of tracing her name in cowpats, he remarks, apropos of nothing: "Anyhow I'm sick and tired of this name Lulu, I'll give her another, more like her, Anna for example, it's not more like her but no matter" (34–5). It is odd that O'Hara overlooks this detail: the Wolf-Man's first sexual experience was apparently with his sister (Freud 1996: 176). He later focused his sexual interest on his beloved 'Nanya' (a servant girl), whose reprimand of him when he played with his penis in front of her – telling him that it would result in a wound in that place – was part of the aetiology of his castration complex. The older sister's name was Anna – the diminutive is Nanya – and parts of the analysis suggest unresolved feelings toward the sister.³

This invocation of the name Anna is presumably an allusion by Beckett (one might say, an admission) directing us to his source.⁴ If this gives us warrant to assume the seduction by a sister as a trauma at the root of the narrator's castration complex, such a figure might explain his assertion that the just-undressed Lulu-Anna was "not the first naked woman to have crossed my path, so I could stay, I knew she would not explode" (39).

III

As mentioned, against O'Hara's assertion, the Wolf-Man is not the only Freudian source for the story, which is to say, for its narrator's psychic misfortunes. Even the reader ignorant of specific sources (who would not then recognise them) is alerted to the presence of the psychoanalytic motifs by some obvious

3. A famous study which revisited the case history, criticising aspects of Freud's interpretations, located the keys to unlocking the Wolf-Man's fantasies and phantasmic memories in his multilingual background, and emphasised the role of the sister Anna, conjecturing a witnessed (or reconstructed) seduction of the sister by the father. (Abraham and Torok, 1986: 20–21, 46–7).

4. The engagement with psychoanalysis by way of allusion may suggest an explanation for the narrator's seeking the Wains among the constellations upon leaving the house. This quasi-archaic English designation for what are commonly called the Big Dipper, part of the Ursa Major, and the Little Dipper – the constellation of Ursa Minor – is derived from the word for "wagon", in this case the large or men's wagon and the little or women's wagon. Apart from strengthening the attachment of the narrator to the departed father, the reference to wagons reminds one of the case study of Little Hans, who developed an irrational fear of horses and of loaded wagons, which Freud linked to an Oedipal dilemma and castration anxiety, partly spurred or exacerbated by the arrival of a little sister. Little Hans also develops coprophilic interests, with the faeces interpreted as substitutes for babies; this is linked by Freud to the heavily loaded wagons, the fear of which is tied to the young boy's nascent theory of reproduction. See Freud (1956). That this allusion would do no more than connect the narrative to another Freudian case history reinforces the sense of it as an unsatisfactory and incompletely worked-out melange of motifs.

transpositions or moments of apparent sublimation in the narrative, at least one of which Beckett does not shrink from indicating via a pun. Such features indeed – to anticipate again – are part of the reason Beckett’s engagement with psychoanalysis in the story causes him difficulties. As O’Hara has it: “Beckett must communicate through his narrating protagonist but without his aid, one might say” (1997: 78). The announcement of the narrator’s erection, for example, is expected owing to the comment: “You speak to people about stretching out and they immediately see a body at full length”. Where the narrator had spoken of stretching himself to full length on the bench, Lulu-Anna, apparently, interprets his wishes sexually, and obliges by subsequently masturbating him – the experience prompting his observation that “women can smell a rigid phallus ten miles away and wonder, How did he spot me from there?” (31). This understanding come to via misunderstanding would seem to determine the narrator’s attitude toward Lulu; but in fact we are (eventually) encouraged to see the attitude as the inevitable consequence of his psychic organisation. A further example of obvious transposition is the moment where the prostitute’s displayed pregnant belly merges with the mountain we have been previously informed (39) is part of the view out the narrator’s window. “She had drawn back the curtain for a clear view of all her rotundities. I saw the mountain, impassible, cavernous, secret, where from morning to night I’d hear nothing but the wind, the curlews, the clink like distant silver of the stone-cutters’ hammers” (44). The “impassible, cavernous, secret” object which prompts visions of escape and freedom clearly describes not the distant mountain but the all-too-proximate pregnant belly. (There is no way of telling, of course, whether Lulu-Anna has become pregnant by one of her clients or by the narrator. There is no confirmed sexual consummation of their relationship; the narrator refers to his “night of love”, having found Lulu-Anna beside him naked upon waking, but seems uncertain of what occurred, and whether it was such: “I looked at my member. If only it could have spoken!” (42). The protagonist also refers to his “marriage” (25), which his relationship certainly was not – though it was “a kind of union in spite of all” (45) – and his pathological

passivity may lead him to accept the prostitute’s claims without contest.)

Gontarski notes of the quartet of stories to which “First Love” belongs that “the unnamed narrator [is] almost always suddenly and inexplicably expelled from the security of a shelter, an ejection that mimics the birth trauma ...” (1995: xxiii). “Mimics” is an apt word; the intrusiveness of the psychoanalytic motifs seems to mark Beckett’s move beyond the “straight” employment of psychoanalysis, whether for humorous or dramatic effect, to a playful deployment which the reader cannot take wholly seriously. The next portion of the story to examine which contains an especially Freudian flavour is the narrator’s relating of the event which changes his status from stravaiging tramp to domiciled layabout: his return to the bench having decided himself, after his own peculiar fashion, to have fallen in love with Lulu-Anna. This portion contains a somewhat coded, yet still apparent, set of references to the theorisation of the castration complex in Freud. We read of the encounter: “She seemed warmly clad, her hands buried in a muff. As I looked at this muff, I remember, tears came into my eyes ... It was things made me weep. And yet I felt no sorrow. When I found myself in tears for no apparent reason it meant I had caught sight of something unbeknownst. So I wonder if it was really the muff that evening, if it was not rather the path, so iron hard and bossy as perhaps to feel like cobbles to my tread, or some other thing, some chance thing glimpsed below the threshold, that so unmanned me” (36). The choice of words or phrases – “the muff”, or “some chance thing glimpsed below the threshold” – tell us of course that it was the chance apprehension of the vulva which “unmanned him”, a word which itself points to the fear of castration (despite Lulu-Anna a moment later being described as having “her legs pressed tightly together”).⁵

5. It should be noted that this is more emphatic in the English; the corresponding French noun *manchon* does not carry the same common vulgar meaning as “muff”, but from the scene one can of course draw the appropriate conclusions; and we must note Beckett is not averse to adapting his English versions to accommodate a pun, as in one of the most quoted lines in “First Love”: “Personally, I have no bone to pick with graveyards” (25). On this point see further the translator’s note on Alain

A discussion of the castration complex ideal for its concision is provided in Freud's paper "Medusa's Head". Having clarified with a tidy equation that "To decapitate = to castrate", Freud continues: "The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a little boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of the mother" (1997: 202). The transfer, in recollection of the scene, of the muff below the threshold to the one above encourages the reader to recognise this Freudian nod; it is, further, a nod which encourages us in our contention that Beckett was beginning to deploy Freud in a parodic fashion, in part as a way of passing beyond the use of psychoanalysis. The fear of castration which helps in the dissolution of the Oedipus complex is something that should be awakened in "a little boy", not a man of twenty five, as the Beckettian narrator estimates, by the date of this father's death, he was at the time of his courtship-of-sorts, and we know Lulu-Anna will be "not the first naked woman to have crossed [his] path" (39). We are certainly again in the presence of Freud, but the motif and tone can only be comical. Before returning to this castration complex, we may note in passing a further feature of our narrator which seems borrowed from Freud: he seems to be one of those men who have made what Freud termed "a special kind of object-choice", and who must divide womankind into mothers (or virgins) and whores (we note in using this now common expression of the dichotomy that Freud is neither as explicit or general in his language or categorisations). His language and the attitude it bespeaks is casually misogynistic. Women can "smell a rigid phallus ten miles away"; his reaction when the prostitute strokes his ankles on the bench is: "I considered kicking her in the cunt" (31); Returning to her house where she begins to undress, he muses: "When at their

wit's end they undress, no doubt the wisest course" (39). The woman appears to him in a whorish light, then, even before he learns she lives by prostitution (42). Freud had analysed this type of object-choice in a famous paper he himself counted one of his "contributions to the psychology of love" (see 1997: 39-48; cf. 54-5), and it seems another of the story's obvious nods. Indeed, the narrator seems only to begin to tolerate the woman when she becomes something of a default mother-figure to him, feeding him, cleaning his room and looking after his leavings, and when he separates from her sexually; she first appears in this other light when he turns to find her smiling above him, after which they quickly settle into this set-up (41-2).

Freud had held this object-choice typical of men whose libido in childhood had dwelt for an abnormally long time on the mother (1997: 43); this lingering of libidinal desire on the mother figure, in other words the extension of the Oedipal attachment well beyond its ordinary course, points to the failure of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. The perceived threat of castration is one spur to the passing of this unconscious attachment and the resulting reordering of the child's psychosexual economy. Our narrator, as mentioned, seems to possess an almost still unresolved castration complex. This motif of castration anxiety on his part recurs, or is confirmed, by the narrator's first survey of the room in which he is to sleep. Led by Lulu-Anna, whom he has obliged to cover up her naked form and bring him there: "I surveyed the room with horror. Such density of furniture defeats imagination. Not a doubt, I must have seen that room somewhere. What's this? I cried. The parlour, she said" (39-40). The "I cried" here seems, not least by its punctuation, deliberately ambiguous, calling us back to his reasoning that tears meant he had "caught sight of something unbeknownst". The place the room had previously been seen is below Lulu-Anna's dress by the canal. This is explained – and it seems the only way to explain this sentence and the narrator's reaction – by its obedience to a "technical rule" which Freud expresses, "according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration" (1997: 202).⁶ Just as the hair on the Medusa's head, represented as snakes, a common sublimated symbol for the penis,

Badiou's discussion of the presence of a vocabulary of prohibition in a passage in *Watt*, discerning also a "vocabulary of castration which Beckett's original French crudely suggests": Beckett's English "I'll be buggered" removes any such reference (Badiou 2004: 9, 139 n. 17).

signifies castration, so here the furniture serves to awaken our narrator's anxiety.⁷ He is compelled immediately to evacuate the room of most of its "hundreds of pieces, large and small" (40). Beckett is of course stretching the motif here, and this would count as one of the unsuccessful uses of psychoanalysis in the story which O'Hara laments, and which may have dissatisfied Beckett himself. That it is present, for the reader to recognise, seems however beyond doubt.

The incorporation of the motif is rather inadequate, given that the naked Lulu-Anna had been standing in front of the narrator just moments before. Another element of this complex, also incompletely or inadequately incorporated, is Freud's discussion of the concurrent and opposite effect of penis-substitutes which evoke castration anxiety. "The sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone ... Becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact" (1997: 202). "The erect male organ also has an apotropaic effect, but thanks to another mechanism. To display the penis (or any of its surrogates) is to say: 'I am not afraid of you I defy you, I have a penis'" (ibid.: 203). When the narrator's thoughts first turn to the "cunt" on the bench, it is followed by an erection, and the reference to the "iron hard and bossy" path that might have "unmanned" him seems also a nod to this sought reassurance or consolation.

6. Freud had noted in another particularly famous essay, "The Uncanny", that dreams are "fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of a genital symbol" (1953: 235). The twin trees which flank the bench, on which the narrator remarks, might just as well have aroused his unconscious castration anxiety.

7. Freud writes of this (1984: 189): "Among the less easily understandable male sexual symbols are certain *reptiles* and *fishes*, and above all the famous symbol of the *snake*". It is worth quoting in our context from a subsequent passage in the discussion: "The female genitals are symbolically represented by all such objects as share their characteristic of enclosing a hollow space which can take something into itself: by *pits*, *cavities* and *hollows*, for instance, by *vessels* and *bottles*, by *receptacles*, *boxes*, *trunks*

To close this section we may now enumerate a few more of the obvious motifs. First, the narrator's reordering of his room, and the manner in which he installs himself in it, is quite obviously to be read as the attempt, by recreating conditions, to re-enter or regress to the womb. This is clear in the general situation but especially in two comments: once installed, the layabout remarks, apropos of nothing and scarcely of his own volition: "Try and put me out now" (41) – a reference, we recognise, to a recollected birth trauma, a fear of being born, and a desire to return to the womb.⁸ A few lines later, when Lulu-Anna has departed, he continues, emphasising these themes: "I was alone at last, in the dark at last. Enough about that" (42).⁹

Second, the narrator's discovery of the manner in which the prostitute earns her corn proceeds from his being disturbed, in his room, by sounds: "I was more seriously disturbed by other sounds, stifled giggles and groans ... [I]lover's groans and lover's giggles..." (42–3). This seems a direct parody of the primal scene, the child's half-formed intimation of parental intercourse. "First love" is also Oedipal love, and this first comprehension of the parental sexual congress (this occurs after Lulu-Anna has assumed her role as mother, and before she has become an actual one, fulfilling the other possible role for a woman for such as our poor narrator).

Finally, the narrator's flight from the house, prompted by and paralleling the birth of the child, by this very parallel reminds one of the desire to experience rebirth – and connects us again to the Wolf-Man's desire to somehow "rebirth" himself to offer himself as a child to

... Some symbols have more connection with the uterus than with the female genitals: thus, *cupboards*, *stoves* and, more especially, *rooms*".

8. Moorjani (2004) notes how the reading of Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* affected Beckett's engagement with psychoanalysis.

9. Again, a strange sentence may have a Freudian explanation. After the prostitute exits, the narrator remarks: "I heard her steps in the kitchen, then the door of her room close behind her. Why behind her?" This seems again a parodic reference returning us to the Wolf-Man as a child, whose associations led him to the conclusion that the "door" through which children emerge is not the vagina but the anus.

to the father. His escape, through the furniture he has placed in the corridor which had apparently “[made] egress impossible, and *a fortiori* ingress, to and from the corridor” (40) parallels the emergence of the child from the birth canal deeper in the house (“A mass of junk barred my way, but I scrabbled and barged my way through it in the end, regardless of the clatter”); and it begins with a reflection which recalls his horror of the vulva, apparently sympathising with the wailing child: “What that infant must have been going through!” (45). Again, the psychoanalytic motifs are obvious, and go beyond the single Freudian source for the story identified by O’Hara.

IV

This might all be interesting enough to note, and we hope illuminating for many readers and students of the story; but it behoves us to draw further conclusions from the work, and the peculiar character of its deployment of Freud. In the first place, we identify the beginning of a shift in Beckett’s attitude to and reliance upon Freud. We may note that although it fascinated him, Beckett’s attraction to psychoanalysis was probably never unreserved. Neither of the two volumes of Beckett’s letters so far published (Fehsenfeld et al. 2009, 2011) contains any significant discussion of Freud or psychoanalysis, even though the first volume overlaps with Beckett’s time spent in the Tavistock Clinic in London and his undergoing analysis with Wilfred Bion, during which period he developed an intense interest in the subject (Knowlson 1997: 175–82; for more on Beckett’s treatment see Moorjani 2004). His interest was probably always more literary than clinical; reflecting on his course of treatment with Bion, Beckett was noncommittal, perhaps even undecided, about its effectiveness (Knowlson and Knowlson 2007: 67–8). He may well have changed his mind somewhat as to its literary potentials, and there is some evidence in “Premier Amour” that, just as he was experimenting in writing French, he was simultaneously seeking for a new and better way to incorporate psychoanalysis into his work. That Beckett was not greatly successful may have hastened the eventual disengagement.

It would certainly not be his last extended flirtation with Freud in his fiction – Freud is particularly present in “From an Abandoned

Work”, while O’Hara’s study shows how the first half of *Molloy*, featuring the eponymous protagonist, features Jungian motifs, while its succeeding portion with Moran at the centre, searching for Molloy, foregrounds Freud; Moorjani (2004: 178) notes how Bion’s work in the 1950s on the notion of an “unborn twin” influences the third and fourth *Fizzles* from the early 1970s – but its character does suggest Beckett was searching for a new way to deal with or incorporate into his work what fascinated him in Freud. Such a search indicates a degree of dissatisfaction with previous attempts. Commenting on Beckett’s early stories “Assumption” and “A Case in a Thousand”, Gontarski judges them “written as if he were preoccupied with literary models. In the first case Beckett seems to have been reading too many of Baudelaire’s translations of Poe; in the second, too much Sigmund Freud”. It was, however, “with such derivative short fiction that Beckett launched a literary career in 1929, less than a year after having arrived in Paris” (1995: xix). Keeping in mind that Freud influenced Beckett’s earliest forays into literary fiction, we can easily surmise that between 1929 and the four-story sequence of which “Premier Amour” is a part, written in the early post-war period, the character of Freud’s presence and influence has altered, and that Beckett’s purposeful and rather ironic conjuring of motifs in the story recognises earlier derivativeness and hopes to transcend it.

The disengagement with Freud may have been prompted in part by Beckett’s few manifest failures in his fiction associated with his initial enthusiasm and engagement. That enthusiasm showed itself early, and may, as Gontarski proposes, have survived in the descents into an “emblematic skull” which continues in late short fiction. He writes: “Such a creative descent into ‘inner space,’ into the unconscious, had been contemplated by Beckett at least since the earliest stages of *Watt*. In the notebook and subsequent typescript versions of the novel, Beckett noted, ‘the unconscious mind! What a subject for a short story.’ ‘The Expelled’ seems a fulfillment of that wish to plumb ‘perhaps deep down in those palaeozoic profounds, midst mammoth Old Red Sandstone phalli and Carboniferous pudenda ... into the pre-uterine ... the agar agar ... impossible to describe’” (1995: xxiv).

The problems engagement with psychoanalysis present to the writer of fiction overlap with those presented to its interpreter. When the author seeks to incorporate – or one might say in respect of the narrative rather than authorial level, expose – certain standardised aspects of the unconscious mind, these must be transparent. They are, however, thereby coaxed out according to Freudian formulae; in other words, one has a conscious invocation of the unconscious, which becomes automatically derivative, and thereby effectively a literary allusion. Once one follows Freud, through Freud and his “discovery” of the unconscious, inviting the reader to uncover it in the story, it becomes an unwieldy literary device, anchored to psychoanalytic theory. The difficulties posed by such a pursuit for the writer are manifest. To craft a narrative in such a way as to put on display for the reader elements of the narrator’s psyche which remain inaccessible to the narrator himself, to have a character show us in word and deed the unconscious ground of his behaviour, much more than he tells in his direct address, risks tending toward laboured flags and signals, not to mention a rather tedious kind of dramatic irony. We might suggest that one has then two basic alternatives when dabbling in the unconscious in literature: either to abandon structure altogether in the mode of Joyce’s *Wake*, letting the *Ulysses* Nighttown episode’s Poldy and poor Stephen Daddyless slip and morph further into the night-time book’s HCE and Shem the Penman, or to openly and deliberately invoke the categories and common motifs of psychoanalysis. Beckett obviously opts for the latter course, and is compelled, as one must be, to treat the subject matter somewhat ironically.¹⁰

This, however, leaves us unsure as to whether the author has given us clues to his narrator’s psyche or a series of nulls. This

10. In this mode of humorous reference one might also recall Frank O’Connor’s “My Oedipus Complex”, incidentally also a story that appears roughly structured around a Freudian piece – that is, the loose mapping of the comic tale of Larry Delaney paying suit to his mama, and his father’s return from the front, up to the arrival of the young brother Sonny that dissolves his pomp and passions, onto the story told by Freud of the young boy in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”. Moorjani (2004: 174) asserts the importance of this text for Beckett’s reading of Freud.

uncertainty regarding the purpose of the psychoanalytic motifs must trouble the reader and interpreter.

They do not sufficiently explain anything, or explain enough, though we might, indeed must, expect them to do so – perhaps even to function, say, like the famous acrostic in Nabokov’s “The Vane Sisters” and inform us of a higher (or indeed lower) impetus behind the narrator’s report, of which he is ignorant and to which we are privy.¹¹ In this respect the apparently parodic nods, though they might represent an advance on vague and derivative presentation of Oedipal traumas, cannot amount to successful literary use of Freud. One might again make recourse to Nabokov, that great opponent of Freud, for analogy: Beckett’s failures in “First Love”, where the parodic nature of the Freudian nods and invocations do not serve any successful parody, either of Freud or psychoanalytic types, resemble the failures of *Pale Fire*, a novel satirical in presentation and tone but without a proper object, personality type, group, society or set of practices to satirise, because its narrator is a madman locked into an epic delusion. Now it must be noted that this parodic treatment does

11. Nor do they serve the purpose of forcing us to apprehend the total unreliability of the narrative by demonstrating that everything described to us is coloured by the narrator’s character and judgements, the game played by Nabokov in *Lolita* – the description of the academic ladies in the hotel lobby, for example, suggests immediately a lesbian couple, but the fact that Humbert accords them the names Miss Lesley and Miss Fabian reminds us he has already concluded this and tailored his reconstruction of their appearance according to this judgement. This is the same with the numerous accounts of the mispronunciation of his name (as Hamburg, Hapsburg, Habsburg, etc), when we are told that the name Humbert Humbert is of his own choosing for the narrative (did his real name inspire such difficulties?), the listing of a playwright Clare Quilty in the book he reads in prison at the beginning, or the account of his “initial girl-child” Annabel, partly spun from Poe, a fact acknowledged by name and allusion. “First Love” might prompt us to the conclusion that the narrator’s judgements are unreliable because he is hamstrung by psychological hang-ups, but in Beckett’s piece this seems of no consequence, and further cannot be simply settled upon due to the parodic nature of the Freudian allusions.

tune with a common feature of Beckett's work: its distrust of symbolism or allegory, and its correspondingly ironic or disdainful treatment of symbols. Only the most obvious example, the only one we need mention, is the leaf on the tree near the close of *Godot*: such an obvious potential symbol of hope in a work whose hopelessness is so terminal as to be intentionally comic, can only, to use a phrase one of the characters might, be a cod.¹² He is similarly bizarre, playful and disrespectful in his allusions, particularly to the philosophical tradition. And so the treatment of psychoanalysis here must share this comical or unserious approach. Its problems, however, even if its incorporation is consistent with Beckett's general late attitude toward symbolism and allusion, remain.

It remains to examine, briefly, the interpretive difficulties that arise for a critic who does not account for and discuss the psychoanalytic motifs. This is exemplified in a well known essay by Julia Kristeva ("The Father, Love and Banishment"); her inattention to the motifs is doubly surprising because of her own attachment to Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a practitioner and literary critic. We isolate a few portions of the essay, which does take a psychoanalytic approach, but ignores the directly-imported Freudian motifs, to illustrate its problems. The analysis, which in part links the narrator of "First

12. A further point may illustrate how Beckett found symbolism rebarbative. Beckett's reluctance to grant (surprisingly frequent) requests for all-female productions of *Godot* is well known. This came to a head when authorial wish was disregarded by legal ruling, and a production which included women impersonating the male characters played in Holland. Beckett's fury was such that he banned productions of his plays in the country (Knowlson 1997: 694–95). We suspect this was not only the anger of an author who feels his work compromised by disregarding of his instruction. The casting of women in the roles leaves the play open to employment as political statement, and so to attachment to a political agenda, something which, even were the agenda nebulous, is unwarranted. *Catastrophe* and his ban on his work's performance in apartheid South Africa, not to speak of his wartime resistance activity, demonstrate sufficiently that Beckett was not apolitical in his life or work; but attaching to any work a political context it cannot support is to risk rendering it heavy with symbolism alien to its essence.

Love" to Mouth in *Not I*, begins where the story does, with the father's death; this is what allows the narrator to love, what frees him and even enjoins him to love: "To love is to survive paternal meaning" (Kristeva 1980: 150). This death is also what leads him to Lulu-Anna, who is obviously connected to the fact that "if Death gives meaning to the sublime story of this first love, it is only because it has come to conceal barred incest" (ibid.: 151). Kristeva writes:

Racked between the *father* (cadaverous *body*, arousing to the point of defecation) and *Death* (empty *axis*, stirring to the point of transcendence), a man has a hard time finding something else to love. He could hardly venture in that direction unless he were confronted with an undifferentiated woman, tenacious and silent, a prostitute to be sure, her singing voice out of tune in any case, whose name remains equally undifferentiated, just like the archaic breast (Lulu? or Lully? or Lolly?), exchangeable for another (Anna), with only one right: to be inscribed "in time's forgotten cowpats," and thus to blend into "history's ancient faeces." This will then be the only love – one that is possible, one that is true: neither satyric, nor Platonic, nor intellectual. But *banishment-love* (ibid.: 149).

Any reader familiar with Kristeva's writing will know of the difficulties of her style, which for most honest critics is an irritant – elusive, allusive, and, in that incomparable French way, fond of eliding relevant material in making connections, or steps in an argument, by taking whole critical traditions or sub-traditions as read. Here what is elided, however, is what is missed (or for some reason simply ignored, though its relevance to her critical reading could hardly be contested): the fact that Beckett so consciously deploys obvious Freudian motifs. It is not style, then, where the primary failing lies, but content. Kristeva will argue ultimately that, despite its strangeness and its challenge, Beckett's writing including "First Love", so frequently held demythologising, fails to address and so reinforces one crucial and enduring myth, that of the untouched, serene Mother which recurs everywhere from the Marian cult to the Freudian couch.

Yet, at a glance and despite *Not I*, the community that Beckett so challenges quickly notices that the writer's work *does* leave something untouched: the jubilant serenity of the unapproached, avoided mother. So beyond the debris of the desacralized sacred that Beckett

calls upon us to experience, if only as lucid and enlightened observers, does there not persist an *other* – untouched and fully seductive? The true guarantee of the last myth of modern times, the myth of the feminine ... And that will have to do until someone else comes in a burst of song, color, and laughter to conquer the last refuge of the sacred, still inaccessibly hidden in Bellini's remote Madonnas. To give them back to us transformed, secular, and corporeal, more full of language and imagination (ibid.: 158).¹³

Leaving aside the dubious, faded-fad critical language of the passage, with its notions of no doubt “carnavalesque” bursts of song or laughter, the problems with these claims are apparent. Whether they can be applied to Beckett's writing generally – to his presentation of the nervous or sickly, burdensome and all-too-human mothers of, say, “From an Abandoned Work”, *Footfalls* or *Krapp* – is itself debatable; but they appear particularly misplaced in relation to “First Love”. As we have noted, both a prolonged and perhaps unresolved Oedipal attachment is apparent in the narrator; and he appears one who has made that “special object-choice” which divides women into whores or mothers (virgins, Madonnas). This is well enough signalled, at least if one is aware of what is going on, by the contiguity, in the narrator's list of the places he had heard or learned about love, of brothel and church (34). To speak of the presence of a serene, unapproachable or

13. For Kristeva's extended discussion of Bellini's art and the figure of the mother in the same volume, see “Motherhood According to Bellini” (1980: 237–70).

virginal mother in this respect is only to point out a psychoanalytic motif present by conscious importation. It is the corollary, in the context of the story, of a love that consists of liaising with a prostitute.

We recognise, to conclude, the difficulties which beset Beckett as they would any writer attempting fictional incorporation of Freud, where the reader must glimpse the unconscious of the character beneath his conscious narrative (incidentally, these difficulties are not insurmountable: precisely this trick was perhaps most brilliantly pulled off by Joyce's old pupil Italo Svevo in his masterful *La coscienza di Zeno*). And we recognise that “First Love”, already a literary experiment in its choice of language, also represents an attempt on Beckett's part to redefine – or begin a redefinition of – his relationship to psychoanalysis. We have noted that the story is replete with Freudian motifs, and enumerated a handful; apart from this, we have noted the difficulties they create for readers and interpreters. These are difficulties which cannot be ignored: as we saw in Kristeva's case, to bring ordinary critical approaches – in particular psychoanalytically-influenced approaches – to bear on Beckett without recognising, acknowledging and accounting for his own use of classic psychoanalysis leads one up blind alleys. We hope to have succeeded not only in the demonstration of these points, but also in our general aim of illuminating something of the story's form, content and import for students of it.

Works Cited

- Abraham, Nicolas and Torok, Maria. 1986. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. Nicholas Rand. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP.
- Badiou, Alain. 2004. *On Beckett*, trans. Alberto Toscano. Manchester: Clinamen Press.
- Baker, Phil. 1997. *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1995. *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*. New York: Grove Press.
- Falzeder, Ernst, Giampieri-Deutsch, Patrizia (Eds.). 1993. *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Fehsenfeld, Martha Dow, More Overbeck, Lois (Eds.). 2009. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. 1, 1929–40*. Cambridge UP.
- Fehsenfeld, Martha Dow, More Overbeck, Lois, Craig, George, Gunn, Dan (Eds.). 2011. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. 2, 1941–56*. Cambridge UP.

- Ferenczi, Sándor. 2003. "On the Ontogenesis of the Interest in Money" in *Sex and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Ernest Jones. Montana: Kessinger, 319–31.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1956. *Standard Edition Vol. X: Two Case Histories*, trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press.
- _____. 1953 *Standard Edition Vol. XVII*, trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press.
- _____. 1984 *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. London: Pelican.
- _____. 1996. *Three Case Histories: The 'Wolf Man', The 'Rat Man' and 'The Psychotic Doctor Schreber'*. New York: Touchstone.
- _____. 1997. *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*. New York: Touchstone.
- Gibson, Andrew. 2007. *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency*. Oxford: OUP.
- Gontarski, Stanley. 1995. "From Unabandoned Works: Samuel Beckett's Short Prose", in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, edited by S. Gontarski. New York: Grove Press, pp. xi-xxxii.
- Houppermans, Sjef (Ed.). 2004. *Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui 5: Beckett & La Psychanalyse/ & Psychoanalysis*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Knowlson, James. 1997. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Knowlson, James and Knowlson, Elizabeth (Eds.). 2007. *Beckett Remembering / Remembering Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Ed. Leon Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lloyd, David. 1989. "Writing in the Shit: Nationalism and the Colonial Subject". *Modern Fiction Studies* 35.1: 69–85.
- McMullan, Anna. 2004. "Irish/Postcolonial Beckett" *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, Ed. L. Oppenheim. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 89–109.
- Moorjani, Angela. 2004. "Beckett and Psychoanalysis" in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, Ed. L. Oppenheim. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 172–93.
- O'Hara, James Donald. 1997. *Samuel Beckett's Hidden Drives: Structural Uses of Depth Psychology*. Gainesville: Florida UP.

Received 12th September 2012

Last version 25th January 2013

Paul O'Mahoney completed a PhD in philosophy in University College Dublin. His recent and forthcoming publications include articles on James Joyce, the political philosophy of Leo Strauss, Descartes' *Olympica* dream-sequence, the seminars of Jacques Derrida, and Plato's *Symposium*. He teaches philosophy at the Marino Institute of Education in Dublin.