



The naked peer in flip flops and other strange stories

JEREMY Lewis has always been addicted to embellishing anecdotes or stories, preferably of the tallest impossible literary sort, as far as I can make out. He is like the Malvern public schoolboy that he once was, who is addicted to doughnuts and cream cakes. In this, the third instalment of his autobiography, he cannot get enough of them into his mouth at the same time.

Take what he comes up with about my much-maligned relative Mervyn Horder (the second Lord Horder), an

Jeremy Lewis's autobiography reveals the real experiences of a literary figure consumed by tall stories, writes John Horder

eccentric who had twice been prosecuted as a result of sending naked photographs of himself through the post in the 1960s, and latterly the managing director of Duckworths, the publishers, in Covent Garden. This is recorded in the third volume of Lewis's literary tall stories.

When Jeremy met Mervyn in a pub in Camden Town where Beryl Bainbridge also used to meet him, he "must have been in his early 80s by then: he was wearing a skimpy bathing costume, rubber flip-flops and a vest, and had shaved and

waxed his legs for the occasion".

A sentence or two later, after conferring with his beloved mentor on such all-important matters, Alan Ross, the poet, editor of *The London Magazine* and cricket journalist for the *Observer*, he concluded: "I suspect the flippers and the goggles were [Mervyn's] own embellishments."

Not so about the goggles. Mervyn was a keen motorcyclist, who specialised in looking like *Toad in the Willows* when the latter was on the verge of

taking up with some mad new invention like the motor car. In this instance, Jeremy found it impossible to tell the embellished from the real.

Mervyn's obituary, when it appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*, included a sulky photograph of him complete with goggles, but without the rubber flip-flops.

In another context entirely, it fell to Dennis Enright, the poet, and Jeremy after him, when both were working for publishers Chatto and Windus, to try to edit Iris Murdoch's novels.

On one of two occasions, Jeremy comes out with the whole truth: "I always felt that Chatto had done her a great disservice by not insisting on editing her later books, but by then it was too late. Her novels were treated as Holy Writ... As Dennis soon discovered, she was not prepared to be edited in any way." End of story.

The most heartbreaking chapter is the last, in which Ross, as a result of many years of depression dating from experiences in the Second World War, attempts suicide, and eventually dies.

In the last sentence, Jeremy sums up the whole book: "Dennis and Alan had been my mentors and my friends, the two men I loved and admired more than any others in the literary world, father figures standing in for the one I had lost."

After a lifetime of embellished anecdotes, he might remember TS Eliot's infamous saying in *Four Quartets*: "In my end is my beginning."

■ *Grub Street Irregular: By Jeremy Lewis. The Harper Press £20*

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MOST famous for plays such as *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, in which tramps philosophise about parsnips, aged parents live in rubbish bins, and a faded genteel lady sits buried to her waist in the sand endlessly deciphering the words on her toothbrush, Samuel Beckett has been described as one of the most pessimistic writers of modern times, yet his work also makes people laugh across the world.

In these two highly readable books we are given insights into the complexity of both the man and his works.

Le Juez's *Beckett before Beckett* is like a literary detective novel.

Beckett taught courses on French literature at Trinity College Dublin from 1930-31, but his own lecture notes have been lost or destroyed.

Le Juez tracked down the notes taken by one of his students, Rachel Burrows, and uses these as the basis for reconstructing what he said. We learn that Beckett was not at all the hopeless teacher that he himself said he was. Indeed, there is clear evidence that he both enthused his students about French writers and gave them good practical advice on

Sifting clues to the mind of a literary genius

Careful scrutiny of one of Beckett's student's old lecture notes offers an insight into the complex influences behind his work, writes Michael Worton

structuring their essays.

Le Juez points out that Burrows was, like many students, sometimes muddled in taking her notes, so she tenaciously follows up all of Burrows's leads.

We learn, for instance, that Beckett hated Balzac for turning his characters into "clockwork cabbages" whose every action is determined by causality, much preferring writers such as Gide and Proust (and Dostoevsky), who highlighted the complexity of reality rather than trying to reduce it to

explainable phenomena.

Le Juez's book also emphasises Beckett's admiration for the 17th-century French classical dramatist Racine, precisely for the lack of action in his plays. This does not mean that there is no psychological and emotional drama; on the contrary, and Beckett's own work is influenced by Racine's theory that "all invention consists in making something out of nothing": as the Irish critic Vivian Mercier famously said, *Waiting for Godot* is "a play in which nothing happens, twice".

Le Juez reveals, for example, that Beckett considered Act 2 of Racine's *Andromaque* to be the finest act in all of classical theatre – because it reveals and anatomises the dynamics of the human mind, then its stasis and then the final catastrophe.

It is equally intriguing to learn that for him, Phèdre was the first of Racine's plays to contain a "sense of sin". *Beckett before Beckett* tells us a lot about the key French influences on him and his later literary development – and it encourages us to reconstruct the ideas in the lectures ourselves,

comparing our own knowledge of Beckett's works with the things he said about literature nearly 80 years ago.

Mercier's *Beckett/Beckett* was first published in 1977, but this highly personal book remains one of the key books on Beckett – and one of the most readable.

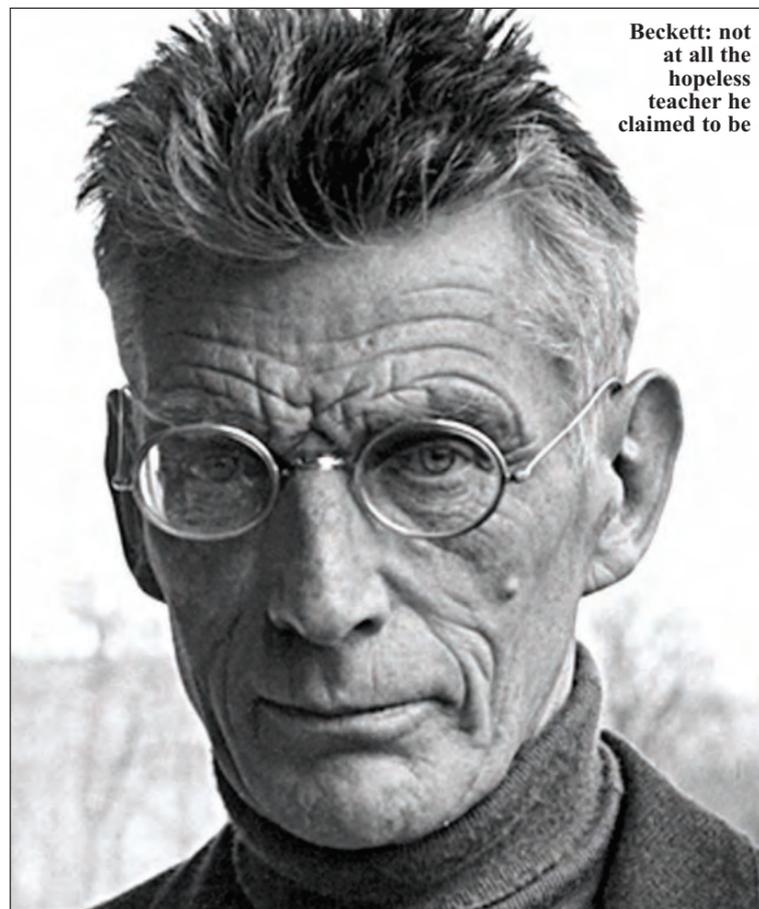
It is personal, quirky, sometimes irritatingly self-congratulatory, and occasionally strangely wayward in its interpretation of Beckett, as when Mercier attacks Beckett's work for the proneness to self-pity expressed by his characters on behalf of the human race. Not particularly endowed with self-irony, he fails to understand that Beckett's characters are endlessly fascinating because they need to be read as and through prisms of irony.

Where Mercier is particularly interesting is in the way in which he structures his book around a series of dialectical oppositions:

thesis/anti-thesis; Ireland/the world; gentleman/tramp; artist/philosopher; woman/man, etc.

Many critics have rightly indicated how much of Beckett's thinking and writing is structured on a series of binary oppositions.

Here, he is very much working in the French philosophical tradition. However, most of Beckett's critics focus on only one side of each of the



Beckett: not at all the hopeless teacher he claimed to be

oppositions, whereas Mercier emphasises the "minor" pole, eg the "gentleman" rather than "the tramp", obliging us to rethink the nature of these oppositions and see them as complex, mobile relationships, rather than simple hierarchies.

One doesn't always agree with Mercier, but he certainly makes one think and the book is written in such a lively fashion that it is difficult to put down – except in occasional moments of exasperation – and one quickly picks up the book again.

Both books will interest a wide readership, since they remind us in different but equally powerful ways that great literature comes in often labyrinthine ways from complex individuals who are themselves caught up in intricate webs of influence and resistance.

■ *Michael Worton is vice-provost and Fielden professor of French language and literature at University College London*
■ *Beckett before Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Lectures on French Literature. By Brigitte Le*

Juez. Translated by Ros Schwartz. Souvenir Press £12

■ *Beckett/Beckett. The classic study of a modern genius. By Vivian Mercier. Souvenir Press £12*

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