



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Brooker, Joseph (2001) What tedium: boredom in "Malone dies". *Journal of Beckett Studies* 10 (1-2), pp. 29-39.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/182/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

What Tedium: Boredom in *Malone Dies*

Joseph Brooker

Let me start with a quotation.

So boredom, we are told, like happiness or interest, can never be fixed directly by the naked eye – let alone pursued as an end, or conceptualized – but only experienced laterally, or after the fact, as something like the by-product of something else. When taken as an end in its own right, boredom ceases to be that and imperceptibly transforms itself into something else.... So no boredom in its own right, only boring activities, or something like a fading effect of boredom after the fact.

No-one ever really said that, and part of my initial contention is that no-one would want to. I'm misquoting Fredric Jameson's 1983 essay 'Pleasure: A Political Issue', and substituting my keyword for his.¹ But rereading Beckett's *Malone Dies* with an eye on the motif of boredom has put me in mind of Jameson's formulations of the problematics of pleasure. Jameson begins his meditation on that subject by registering its fugitive character, the notorious difficulty of pinning it down – the sense that pleasure is a fragile thing, prone to being cracked open or spilled if it is gazed at too hard. Pleasure, he muses, is two different things in experience and in analysis – in the passing joy of unreflection and in the clinical hour of dissection – and this makes its critical and theoretical tabulation a seriously compromised business, for it would seem that whatever is most essential about pleasure will by definition evade anyone actively bidding to locate it. The likely resultant sensation is perhaps summed up by Malone's figment of an alter ego, MacMann: 'I must be happy... it is less pleasant than I should have thought'.² Pleasure cannot be fixed at the time of its occurrence, for the act of knowing about it would, on this account, disrupt or dam its flow. But it cannot really be known afterwards, or grasped analytically, either: it is doomed to be, at best, 'a fading effect after the fact', and can no more be 'conceptualized' than it can be 'pursued as an end'. Pleasure, right from the start of Jameson's essay, is evidently such a slippery affair that there is something heroic in his decision to carry on the discussion for another 12 pages or so.

I started with boredom, and boredom is my topic. But this convoluted account of pleasure makes an instructive contrast, I think, with whatever account we might feel able to give of boredom. Jameson's meditation on the subject is characteristically self-complicating, *involved*, rhizomatically vagrant – but not, I think, to the extent that it radically contradicts and undermines the most ordinary intuitions about what kind of thing pleasure is. I suspect that a lot of people, a lot of the time, would agree with the basic proposition that pleasure is in a sense inscrutable – is something that

¹ See Fredric Jameson, 'Pleasure: A Political Issue', in *The Ideologies of Theory, vol 2: Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988), p.62.

² Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), p.255. Subsequent references to this text are given in parentheses.

can be undergone, but had better not be thought about too much while it's being undergone, lest it be dissipated by the unwieldy effort. Pleasure as fragile, as fugitive, as unknowable, as something that flits out of the corner of the eye – all of this, I suggest, is really quite an everyday assumption. But what about boredom? We don't seem to think about boredom in this way, if we think about it at all. There is nothing elusive about boredom, in any sense. That is to say, firstly, that boredom isn't an experience that eludes us in life – it seems, for some people and at some times, to be waiting around every corner, or on a stool in every bar. Jameson tells us that pleasure cannot be pursued as an end, presumably meaning that the pursuit will jeopardize the pursuer's chance of catching up with it – but at least the pursuit of pleasure is a notion that makes a vague sort of sense. The pursuit of boredom, on the other hand, sounds not only undesirable, but totally unnecessary. No need to pursue boredom, for it pursues us: like the celebrated inevitabilities of death and taxes, it'll be along soon enough. But boredom is also unelusive in that there seems little problem with the idea of looking at it – of seeing it steady and seeing it whole. Quite unlike the pleasure described by Jameson, boredom doesn't seem to know much of a split between experience and analysis, the moment of immersion in it and the moment of its detached dissection. To be bored seems to permit the analysis of one's condition without the risk of losing the condition itself: and the analyst of the phenomenon of boredom is by no means necessarily left stranded, disablingly detached from the condition that he or she seeks to describe. On the contrary, with boredom there may even be a healthy sort of traffic between the two levels: to set out to analyze boredom, preferably under laboratory conditions, sounds like an advisable route for anyone, in Jameson's phrase, 'pursuing it as an end', while by the same token the boree, slumped in an armchair and driven to ponder his or her own state for want of any less boring object of attention, may actually find that the effort increases the degree of boredom under analysis. The act of observation, then, may well change the phenomenon observed: but only to the extent of increasing it, making it proliferate all the more successfully. To this extent, boredom, not pain, emerges as the other of pleasure, the condition which most thoroughly inverts that more desirable feeling's modes of existence.

That's a baseline account of boredom – a solid, reliable, plausible, perhaps even rather boring account of boredom. But I now want to follow the implication of Roland Barthes' announcement: 'It can't be helped: boredom is not simple'.³ And the simplest proposition that I want to make, the premise of the rest of what I have to say, is that if we want a less boring account of boredom, a demonstration of how disconcertingly interesting boredom might really be, we can turn to Beckett.

The literary history of boredom could be an interesting one, in its patchiness, its slightness. For one thing, literature may sometimes be boring, but has not usually been *meant* to be boring: on the contrary, much of it has come to function precisely as what Beckett's Malone calls 'playing', as an antidote to that dangerous, all-encompassing world of boredom that I have just described. For another thing, we may suspect that boredom arrives late on the cultural scene – that the emphasis on boredom as an experience in its own right may be a relatively modern one; that boredom has its own history, maybe even its own sociology. Theodor Adorno's proposal that boredom's 'realm of the eversame'⁴ is an historical affair might help to

³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.25.

⁴ Theodor Adorno, 'Free Time', in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), p.166.

account for the sense of boredom as a modern, even a modernist, theme – a cultural and literary feature of an era in which the extent of a person's boredom was entering a direct relation to his or her *right not to be bored*. Gustave Flaubert declared himself a victim of 'that modern boredom which gnaws the very entrails of a man', and indeed his own fiction represents a straw in the wind here. Part of the scandal of *Madame Bovary* might be ascribed to its revelation, or assertion, of the amount of boredom in the life of a middle-class woman in provincial France. One of the lines which caused most outrage, and had to be rewritten in the wake of the 1857 trial, tells how Emma Bovary 'rediscovered in adultery all the platitudes of marriage' – the moral horror being not the adultery itself, but the claim that marriage was platitudinous, and worse still, that the alternative was equally moribund. This brand of deathly monotony is ostensibly unpromising material for literature – except, perhaps, for that perverse para-literature, anti-literature or ultra-literature that was Beckett's project.

Malone Dies puts up a fair candidate for the most boring scenario in fiction: an ancient man in bed, close to immobile, barely able, so he tells us, to sense the existence of the parts of his own body. There are a few stimuli, admittedly – the stars of the night sky, the convulsions of the figures seen through the window – but on the whole there could hardly be less to write about, less story occurring in the course of the text itself. And story is plausibly one of boredom's others, chief among its antidotes. If it is the lack of event and sequence in Malone's present life that makes this unpromising stuff, it is also his capacity to tell stories, to conjure something just about akin to events and sequences, that promises to ward off boredom. In the midst of a retrospective discussion of life and death early in the novel, Malone muses, 'I wonder why I speak of all this. Ah yes, to relieve the tedium' (179). To speak, or to write, as it may be, with his dwindling stub of pencil lead, is to produce variation, to take flight from what Adorno, after Beckett, calls the 'eversame': to introduce a saving margin of differences into a continuum otherwise blankly homogeneous. This view of the role of Beckettian discourse would echo what I think is a rather traditional assumption that language, for this writer's characters, staves something off – although perhaps the major candidate for that something has been death or the void of an absurd universe, rather than the more bathetic threat of boredom. Still, perhaps that phrase 'to relieve the tedium' has other connotations too: to replace the tedium, to take over its shift; or, as in the idea of relieving oneself, to let off the tedium, to discharge it? Both these senses, in fact, would already complicate the original idea of speech as an alternative to tedium, implying much more of a continuity between the two.

This is a possibility that must be pursued, because one thing that's clear in *Malone Dies* is that storytelling is not just the antidote to boredom, but its source. Malone embarks on the story of the Saposcat with the lament, 'A few words about the boy. This cannot be avoided', and goes on,

He attended his classes with his mind elsewhere. He liked sums, but not the way they were taught. What he liked was the manipulation of concrete numbers. All calculation seemed to him idle in which the nature of the unit was not specified. He made a practice, alone and in company, of mental arithmetic. And the figures then marshalling in his mind thronged it with colours and with forms.

What tedium (172).

'What tedium' receives a line, in effect a paragraph, to itself. There is the sense of a dramatic pause before and after it, a moment's silence or sigh separating it from the discussion of arithmetic on one side and the renewed flood of familial fabulation that follows. The two-word phrase weighs heavily on the page, its very bareness grunting an exasperation with the whole business of telling. On my count it appears five times in the novel, including a variant, to be mentioned later. It bears pondering a little further.

What, in this first instance, is the source of the tedium? Perhaps it is the precise details into which Malone has found himself going: the evocation of 'concrete numbers', the mysterious assertion about the importance of 'the nature of the unit' in calculation, even the characteristic sudden quasi-lyrical burst into a vision of the colours and forms of numbers. These are plausibly tedious matters – but the sense is less of a specific weariness with them than of a weariness with specificity as such. It is partly the expansiveness of the description of this narrative detail that seems to prove tedious – the feeling that a minor matter is flowering into a concern in its own right, but to no purpose or end.

Malone is also, I think, declaring the tedium of the story: abruptly undercutting the still barely begun tale of Sapo with the disarming admission that it's a waste of time – though that phrase wouldn't really signify in this novel, in which there is frequently a feeling that time is for wasting, or at least for filling, passing and exiting without excess ado. 'What tedium': this budding *bildungsroman*, if that's what it bids to be at this point, is already being unmasked as pointless, tiresome and factitious. There may be a sense around here, in fact, of the novel genre, of the yarn as such, as the ultimate object of weary denunciation. It is *fiction* that is tedious, embarrassing in its expanses of tiresome invention, which is one reason why a self-thwarting book like *Malone Dies* feels like the only kind of fiction it is close to honourable to write. In any case, this already cuts athwart the earlier suggestion that storytelling for Malone is a way of evading tedium. It might be intended as that, among other things, but it's clearly not terribly successful in that role.

Still another level can be identified in Malone's complaint: a discontent not just with the experience of storytelling, but with the *act* of storytelling itself. What is tiresome is not only the process of listening to or reading the story, but – surely even more so – the apparent obligation to produce it. In fact, this doubleness must itself be a source of tedium. Malone undergoes the grind of turning out this story, with its digressions and seemingly arbitrary details as an attempt at the business of establishing character; but he is also effectively its reader, and has thus placed himself in an inopportune position. As simultaneously producer and consumer of the same narrative, he cannot in principle be surprised or enlightened by anything he hears. The lack of a gap between narrator and narratee itself appears to guarantee an experience of boredom.

We have something more than boredom here, then: it is auto-boredom, reflexive boredom, the spectacle of a man busy boring himself, and breaking off to say so. But if Malone is his own first narratee, the reader, looking over his shoulder, is in effect a second one. Yet does the reader's reading experience square with Malone's? I think not, or not automatically. Malone's 'What tedium' cues us into assent, into a sharing of his sense that this has indeed been dulling stuff – but I suggest that we *need* this cue, without which we wouldn't actually know whether the story was boring or not. As I've already suggested, there is a certain level on which the entire book looks boring – a certain distance, we might say, from which it *sounds* boring; but any devoted reader of Beckett will also aver that there is a level on which

the whole book is interesting, compelling, even exciting. This is a closer level of attention, at which each twist of voice and text needs to be registered as the latest pivotal movement in a dense mechanism of argumentation, disclosure and retraction. At this level, it is not altogether clear that the tale of Sapo *is* boring – yet the voice of Malone seems to possess sufficient authority to make us accept such a judgement. Tedium, then, turns out not to be something automatic, an instantly recognizable given, but rather a state of affairs which needs signalling – almost a construct, or a consensus reached between two parties.

That consensus is gained by shattering another one. ‘What tedium’, Malone asserts again, in the midst of the Saposcats’ discussion of their son’s future profession (176), or at the end of the lengthy digression on killing rabbits (198). The judgement breaks into these flows of fictionalized information with jarring effect, because it tears up the existing contract between narrator and reader, ending the affair from the side of the former. It is somewhat equivalent to gazing quizzically and earnestly at a painting in a gallery and being interrupted by a tap on the shoulder from the artist, who has come to tell you not to bother. One effect is thus a kind of embarrassment for the reader, who has just managed to convince herself that this stuff is going somewhere after all. But another feature of the model of tedium as in this sense consensual or contractual is its retrospective quality. It is only *after* the boring sentences have been uttered that Malone can put up the signal to inform us of their boring character. The declaration of tedium actually means its *end*, however temporary: for the withering self-assessment ‘What tedium’ *is not itself tedious*. ‘What tedium’ is actually an escape from tedium, a sideways move, an act of coming up for air. Insofar as it interrupts a narrative, it is a *cutting of narrative losses*: it marks a moment when Malone has judged – temporary though this judgement may prove to be – that there is more to be gained from arresting the story than from proceeding with it. He himself describes something like this moment of decision in his account of how Mrs Sapocat abruptly quits her lentil-sorting: ‘To stop in the middle of a tedious and perhaps futile task was something that Sapo could readily understand. For a great number of tasks are of this kind, without a doubt, and the only way to end them is to abandon them’ (196-7).

‘What tedium’ marks an end to tedium, then – we might even think that it marks a kind of excitement, a shift between narrative levels sufficiently sudden to constitute a major event in the book’s act of voicing. But if there is such a gap between tedium and its recognition, then we are closer than we thought to the improbable description of boredom with which I began, in which boredom cannot be named and undergone simultaneously – in the terms borrowed from Jameson, ‘no boredom in its own right, only boring activities, or something like a fading effect of boredom after the fact’. Admittedly, if repeated endlessly, ‘What tedium’ might just become tedious in its own right, a routine which would need still another metalinguistic move to break its grip. This makes it all the more interesting that Malone actually varies the phrase, about a third of the way into the novel, with a new declaration which is interestingly different from, yet plainly intimately related to, the original: ‘Mortal tedium’ (200).

Mortal tedium, we may take it, means not tedium which is itself mortal – that is, transitory and prone to expire – but tedium which is potentially mortal in its effects. Mortal tedium is what bores you to death. In fact we might expect tedium’s connection to death to be one of its central and most pressing features, in the context of this novel. ‘Mortal tedium’ sounds undesirable, but within Malone’s perverse

axiology that cannot be taken for granted. From the very start, after all, he is reporting his desire for a peaceful death:

I shall be neutral and inert. No difficulty there. Throes are the only trouble, I must be on my guard against throes. But I am less given to them now, since coming here. Of course I still have my little fits of impatience, from time to time, I must be on my guard against them, for the next fortnight or three weeks. Without exaggeration to be sure, quietly crying and laughing, without working myself up into a state. Yes, I shall be natural at last, I shall suffer more, then less, without drawing any conclusions, I shall pay less heed to myself, I shall be neither hot nor cold any more, I shall be tepid, I shall die tepid, without enthusiasm. (165)

What is striking about this, in the present context, is that it sounds like a recipe for boredom. Malone aims to shun motion, including 'throes' or 'fits', and achieve as complete an inertia as possible. His tears and laughter will be quiet, minimized, avoiding exaggeration or a worked-up state; he will be neither hot nor cold but tepid – neutral, in fact, a happy median (but it must surely be neither happy nor unhappy) which also happens to be 'natural'. I suggested earlier that boredom was not something for which one had to work: that it could be relied on, like death, to arrive in the absence of anything else. In that sense tedium is indeed natural: an ultra-neutral condition of sameness, continuity, lack of stimulation, which is the most natural thing in the world, after life and death, or indeed during life and death. Boredom, from this perspective, is the default setting of human life, that state that is revealed when extraneously interesting matters are stripped away: and it is to such a state that Malone aspires at the beginning of his book. If boredom is the natural condition of life, he also implies that it resembles death – that it is the antechamber, in effect, of the even stronger form of neutrality which is death.

Mortal tedium, then, sounds like rather a good thing. But why doesn't it sound that way when Malone complains of it? Why should tedium be something to complain of at all, if it resembles the state he wishes to achieve? Let me digress back in time here to yet another of modern literature's quintessential borees, located midway between Emma Bovary and Malone, namely Ibsen's Hedda Gabler. In one of her most memorable lines she declares that her only natural talent is for boring herself to death. This still resounds as one of this prophetic figure's most modern moments, but it also sticks, I think, thanks to its slight incoherence, which verges on the manner of a Wildean paradox. Boring oneself is surely the one thing for which one cannot have a talent. To have a talent is to be able to elaborate, to excel, to transform, to transfix; to bore oneself is to fail in these things, to possess too little talent to keep boredom at bay. Talented people may get boring, it's true, but not because their talent is for boring themselves. The kind of auto-boredom which Malone laments is self-inflicted, a result of his determination to narrate, but it is not a deliberate goal: rather it represents some kind of failure. To return once more to the misquotation with which I began, boredom cannot be 'pursued as an end'; 'when taken as an end in its own right, boredom ceases to be that and imperceptibly transforms itself into something quite different'. Boredom, in short, does begin to have something of the fugitive character of pleasure about it: Malone may begin with a plan to bore himself to death, but that turns out to be too contradictory a project to be undertaken with success. As Hedda Gabler realizes, death can only be accomplished with less boring tools.

So what is that different thing into which boredom transforms itself? I think that Flaubert has already given us the answer, with his boredom that gnaws the entrails of a man. Malone's tedium must be broken off because it is *unbearable*: his repeated declaration 'What tedium' is effectively equivalent to another of his lamenting interruptions, 'This is awful' (175). He rises out of tedium because he feels so impelled, because its unpleasantness outweighs whatever benefits the narration is bestowing. Boredom, that is to say, is after all akin to pain – as Malone discloses when he describes himself as having lived 'groaning with tedium' (178), or later on admits that he could have remained silent: 'I would have held my peace, I would have gone on peacefully being bored to howls' (206). This is a disturbingly paradoxical image. It is the very peace of a quiet life that would bore him to howls – but once howls are arrived at, surely peace is lost? Here we have the most telling reason of all for boredom's elusiveness: it begins in stasis, inertia, and the tepid, yet the very continuation of these things, the very persistence of the eversame, is what drives the boree to suffering, to groans and howls, to a condition like pain – a pain of mind rather than body, maybe, save that we can hardly be sure of the division between those realms in this text, nothing is less certain. The project of boredom, pursued through stasis and calm, is impossible because boredom undoes itself, turns itself into something violent and unendurable, throws up throes of its own.

I seem, then, a bit like Malone in *The Unnamable*, to have come full circle: back round to the point where the absurd misdescription of boredom with which I began has become plausible. In my boring account of boredom I supposed that it was all-consuming, constantly threatening, available 24 hours a day to be sensed, observed, or both at once; and in all of these the opposite of Jameson's description of pleasure. Boredom for Malone is indeed a risk, a fate into which narrative may fall – it is more this, I think, than it is something to *escape* via narration and babble. But it's also surprisingly hard to get a hold of: it's named in retrospect in an act of naming which itself dispels boredom, and it has a way of intensifying itself to the point where it is so unendurable that its claim to the name 'tedium' becomes dubious. Roland Barthes once said that the modern text might discomfort, 'perhaps to the point of a certain boredom'⁵. But in Beckett this movement is inverted: it is boredom that discomforts, to the point where its status as boredom can no longer be called certain. Pure, certified boredom, tedium taken neat, would be the eversame, would achieve the neutrality, the inertia, the tepidity to which Malone aspires – and might, as he implies, be natural. But that natural state is unsustainable, amid the stimuli of numbers and letters, stirrings and permutations, and the groans and howls to which tedium yields. 'What tedium' should perhaps be followed by a question mark. In this world of minute change and precise doubt, it's ultimately unsurprising that even boredom should be brittle, should be always on the point of flickering out like a dead star, the delayed news of whose violent end has just reached us.

⁵ Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, p.14.