

Editor's Introduction

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It is an understatement to say that we have a “new Beckett” on our hands. Indeed, the corpus of Beckett’s works that we read today has little in common with the Beckett canon of just a decade ago. In less than ten years, a textual revolution has taken place and it is still going on. It combines the discovery of unpublished notes and manuscripts, their digital editions, and new critical approaches attempting to take stock of a fast-evolving corpus. The publication of the four volumes of the *Letters of Samuel Beckett*¹ that began in 2009 has brought a host of hitherto unknown details about Beckett’s readings, meetings, loves, and interests. Daniel Gunn has calculated that Beckett wrote an average of one letter a day during his active career, and he condenses in this book’s pages the many lessons one can derive from them. The genetic version of texts like *The Unnamable*,² published in 2014 as part of the “Beckett Digital Manuscript Project,” has modified our interpretation of this difficult but groundbreaking novel. The 2012 publication of the *Collected Poems*³ has doubled the number of poetic texts available, whether by adding drafts, unpublished texts, or different versions of some poems in two languages. Marjorie Perloff, who has defended for a long time the idea that Beckett was primarily a poet, will examine these lyrical treasures in a new key. Mark Nixon gave us a detailed analysis of the *German Diaries 1936–1937*⁴ in 2011, covering Beckett’s fateful trip to Nazi Germany. Here, he covers a broader array of unpublished texts.

In 2014, the rejected short story “Echo’s Bones” was made available, and indeed, given its intertextual riches and semantic opacity, it has changed our sense of how Beckett had progressed and created a specific English prose style just before he shifted to French in the writing of poems and short stories. We now have access to notes in Latin culled from Arnold Geulincx, which helps us peer into the complex philosophical references of many texts, and thanks to the enormous archive kept in the Library of Trinity College we understand better Beckett’s lasting fascination for

psychoanalysis, which was not limited to Bion, his analyst, but included Freud, Jung, Jones, and other psychoanalysts. In 2011, eager readers were granted access to Beckett's entire library; just by browsing in it, we can assess more accurately the impact of his readings of Pascal, Hölderlin, Wittgenstein, Blanchot, Pinget, and many others, and thus comprehend both the role played by literature for Beckett, whose importance John Bolin shows, and take a closer look at the bilingual corpus of a writer who switched codes so easily – an original aspect of his *oeuvre* explored here by Nadia Louar.

What creates this Beckettian revolution is not simply the augmentation of the corpus. Some of the unpublished texts had been known for some time to specialists, to scholars willing to research and decipher Beckett's quasi-illegible handwriting at Reading University, where most of the manuscripts are kept, and in other archives like those in Dublin, Dartmouth, Austin, and Saint Louis. In fact, the expansion of the textual canon has triggered approaches that are both more text-based, and thus, perhaps, more "scientific," but also more daring and exploratory in their borrowings from philosophy, literary criticism, recent Irish and European history, the neurosciences, and even mathematics, as we see in essays by Laura Salisbury, Ulrika Maude, and Baylee Brits.

What is now happening in the field of Beckett studies repeats an evolution that was perceptible in the James Joyce studies of the 1980s. With Joyce, the combination of a new archive of drafts and first versions published by Garland and of methods inspired by *critique génétique* and post-structuralism revitalized the interpretation of texts that had been published before Joyce's demise in 1941. Beckett's death in December 1989, just after the Berlin Wall fell, gave rise to some pathos because of Beckett's stature as a saintly man of modernism, while allowing for a loosening of the strict interpretation of his testament concerning editorial matters. This made possible a broader spectrum of publications, as Dirk van Hulle and Mark Nixon explain.

Today, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to understand why Beckett turned to the theater when he wrote *Waiting for Godot* halfway through his first trilogy (*Molly, Malone Meurt*, and *L'Innommable*), creating the play that made him famous, without having read *Eleutheria*. The original French text of this entertaining farce was published by Editions de Minuit in 1995, but only because unauthorized English translations had been circulating. We are still waiting to have access to unfinished plays like *Le Mime du Rêveur* from 1954, not to speak of innumerable drafts, aborted sketches of plays, and abandoned prose texts. Even the minimalist style of some later

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texts seems to be belied by their earlier drafts or typescripts. Thus, for instance, one can make better sense of the opaque and enigmatic *Fizzles*, those short dense texts of maximum three pages in their final version, if we know their first versions, when they were typed with lots of spaces on more than twenty sheets in the special collection at Dartmouth. In the same manner, the first drafts of *Murphy* and *Watt* make us share the personal crises, follow the false starts and probe the mental convolutions of the author, while throwing light on the numerous literary and philosophical allusions contained in these early novels.

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This undeniable success story in terms of publications, general interest, and hyper-productive scholarship leads to one central question: Why has Beckett become so popular today, when it seems that his work remains aloof, cynical, disabused, and is often deemed too “pessimistic” or downright nihilistic? What has Beckett to say to our shrinking world, to a global village marked by unprecedented technological development but also by widening discrepancies between the rich and the poor, a world riven by religious radicalism, ethnic intolerance, and exploding migrations, or to our recent urban and suburban culture in which gender fluidity is encouraged while short-term encounters can be arranged by swiping a thumb across a screen, this overheated planet in which environmental disasters loom large while many political regimes regress to archaic populism or drift to totalitarianism? Despite being very much work of the late twentieth century, Beckett’s texts, his later plays above all, remain relevant today in a way that cannot be rivaled by modernist predecessors like Joyce, Proust, and Woolf. True, these innovators were instrumental in ushering a revolution in literary language, but they died before World War II. Beckett’s life spanned a long period marked by two world wars and the independence of the Irish Free State, ending just when the Berlin Wall had fallen; he was one of those who knew of mass barbarism in the Holocaust (his close friend Péron died on May 1, 1945, after being held at Mauthausen concentration camp, in which brutal treatment and malnourishment destroyed his health), and he later objected to the widespread use of torture by the French army during the Algerian War of Independence. What is more, his work was able to respond to these moments of drama or catastrophe in a manner that was both historical and stylized or abstract, which avoided the danger of being trapped in local controversies or topical discussions. It has kept an indubitable appeal for situations that he could not foresee, like the siege of Sarajevo (1992–1996) or the destruction of parts

of New Orleans by hurricane Katrina (2005), two dire moments in which human resilience was tested and performances of *Waiting for Godot* gained a new purchase.

Let us take a closer look at *Waiting for Godot*, the play that made Beckett famous overnight. It is still today the most referenced and performed modern play. In the 1950s, the philosopher and essayist Günther Anders gave a prescient explanation of why this play was to become such a classic. In a thoughtful essay, Anders rejected the then dominant allegorical or religious interpretations. For him, Beckett's negative parable presents characters who remain our contemporaries because of the very negativism exhibited by the plot and the dialogues. Vladimir and Estragon risk at any moment being swallowed by an absence of meaning, but this absence would be wrongly interpreted as pertaining to the "absurd." Such a term was used and abused by early commentators, who tried to make sense of the play in the wake of Albert Camus and Sartrean existentialism. In fact, as Anders notes, if Didi and Gogo barely stay alive, in fact they no longer share a "world," which means that they do not own a universe that coheres. In response to that, *Waiting for Godot* presents itself as a farce in which our two "paralyzed clowns" renounce any action as futile. From the start, there is "Rien à faire," or "Nothing to be done," which means that Didi and Gogo understand the primacy of the principle of "Nothing doing," and will make sense of this nothingness creatively. Going on with their pointless activities, they assume that by dint of waiting they can prove that it was worth waiting, for any waiting is a waiting for something or someone. As Anders asserts, Didi and Gogo are "metaphysicians" in Heidegger's sense: they still believe in meaning; they pay homage to meaning, a meaning left to an always postponed revelation. Here is no absurdity, even if the tramps appear to survive outside nature, time, and history. Because they embody a concept of "Being without Time," their desultory antics offer a pointed satire of Heidegger's first philosophy as deployed in *Being and Time*. This point was not lost for Adorno, who applied themes from Anders to his reading of Beckett's *Endgame*.⁵

Anders goes further for, as he sees it, the irruption of the second couple made up of Lucky and Pozzo has the effect of an interpretation: the pair of new characters takes on a "deciphering function."⁶ Indeed, Lucky and Pozzo, after they rush on the stage to break the tedium, embody the couple of the master and the slave with a vengeance. What happens is the splicing of two male couples, a "pseudocouple" and its darker double, which looks more like a "perverse couple." Both are compared by Anders with the *maris imaginaires* (fictional husbands) prevalent in French fairy tales (*BWT*, 144).

The abstract “pseudocouple” made up of Vladimir and Estragon meets the historically over-determined couple of the Master and Slave, a perverse couple occupied by games of power and subjection, of domination and abjection. The powerful allegory of alienation takes its full meaning once it is spliced with the paradigm of survival and mutual assistance displayed by Didi and Gogo.

Beckett had worked with the concept of the “pseudocouple” when he wrote *Mercier et Camier* in French two years before he composed *Godot*. He was revitalizing Flaubert’s unforgettable couple of Bouvard and Pécuchet, one of the male pairs that launched literary modernism.⁷ If Mercier and Camier constitute Beckett’s first identifiable “pseudocouple,” it is because they function less as a symbiotic couple than as two stooges who, like Laurel and Hardy, create comedy by never reaching full synchronicity: Mercier and Camier “would arrive simultaneously at often contrary conclusions and simultaneously begin to state them.”⁸ Thus, anticipating Didi and Gogo, Mercier and Camier often try to get away from each other but without success, as in this typical passage:

I’m off, said Camier.
 Leaving me to my fate, said Mercier. I knew it.
 You know my little ways, said Camier.
 No, said Mercier, but I was counting on your
 affection to help me serve my time.
 I can help you, said Camier, I can’t resurrect you.
 Take me by the hand, said Mercier, and lead me
 far away from here. I’ll trot at your side like
 a little puppy dog, or a tiny tot. And the day
 will come—.

(MC, 33)

This co-dependent banter interrupted by the author’s whimsy sets the tone for later “pseudocouples,” Moran father and Moran son in *Molloy*, Didi and Gogo of course, Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, Pim and the narrator of *How It Is*, and so on. Meanwhile, the other couple made up of the Master and Slave follows a different logic. When Lucky and Pozzo enter with a bang, we discover a master all too pleased with himself accompanied by a slave apparently as satisfied with his fate: Lucky enjoys his servile condition because he does not have to worry about freedom any longer. What Hegel and Marx presented as the engine of history, the mechanism of exploitation and alienation moving steadily from Antiquity and the Middle Ages to the age of capitalistic production, is suddenly projected on the stage of *Waiting for Godot* as a delirious farce. A bitter farce, indeed, that brings back to mind a sense that history has a meaning, if only by

reminding us that slaves can want to be enslaved, as we learn from theoreticians ranging from Etienne de La Boétie to G. W. F. Hegel. Thus historical or allegorical meaning appears only when it seems about to be denied. Anders analyzes this cogently:

Since the early thirties when Hegel's dialectic and Marx's theory of the class struggle began to fascinate French intellectuals, the famous image of the "master and slave" in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* was so deeply engraved in the consciousness of the generation born around 1900 that it occupies the place that the image of *Prometheus* held in the nineteenth century: it is now the *image of man in general*. Sartre is the main witness of this change. If in the Orestes of *Les Mouches* he presented a typical Promethean figure (as had Goethe, Shelley, Byron, and Ibsen's *Brandt*) he then replaced the symbol by the Hegelian image. What is crucial in this new symbol is the alliance of "pluralization" and "antagonism": *Man* in the singular becomes a *pair of men*; the individual (who, as a metaphysical self-made man, fought a Promethean struggle against the gods) is now replaced by *men* who fight *each other* for domination.⁹

This is why Didi and Gogo, surprisingly at first, seem to envy the other couple before being revolted by the extreme form of alienation it represents. They cannot help longing for the old times that Lucky and Pozzo incarnate; indeed, there were happier times when Lucky could sing and dance, whereas now he can only "think," which means spout delirious gibberish; besides, this new time is spent in sadomasochistic games. In Anders's reading, *Waiting for Godot* is saved from nihilism because of the systematic clowning of all the characters, survivors, and tormentors alike; having successfully integrated the two couples in a single orbit, Beckett taps the tradition of anarchist comedy invented by Charlie Chaplin. His play's apparent indifference to meaning, hence to metaphysics and religion, allows audiences to rediscover the most basic ethical virtues, the bedrock of the human without humanism. Godot is not the name of God, but of what remains after God has vanished, as we can gauge in the powerful performance from the 1970s re-staged in the spring of 2018 by Ilan Ronen at the Jaffa Theater near Tel Aviv, in which the four actors spoke alternatively in Hebrew and Arabic. These four characters are thus less God's clowns than the clowns who appear at the end of metaphysics, the paradox of Nietzschean clowns capable of offering some hope for peace. As Anders puts it:

the character who earned most gratitude in our century was the woeful figure of the early Chaplin. Apparently farce became the last refuge for compassion, the complicity of the wretched our last comfort. Although the

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mere *tone* of humaneness which springs from this barren soil of meaninglessness offers only minimal comfort, although the comforting voice does not know why it comforts or who is the Godot it takes as an object of hope – it proves that warmth means more than meaning and also that it is not the metaphysician who has the last word, but only humanity's friend.¹⁰

Beckett thus replaces the image of the suffering individual, who could still be identified with a suffering Christ, with his endlessly open dialectical pseudo-couples. Such a turn to human duality makes room for the possibility of sharing if not viable action, at least a “world.” There is a world of compassion even when the concept of “world” has disappeared. Compassion is not incompatible with the most hilarious satire of contemporary illusions. Precisely because of an apparent cynicism couched in verbal techniques marked by repetition letting alienation and nihilism shine forth, Beckett makes the values of courage and fraternity come alive in spite of all. These values impose themselves forcibly and without any trace of the humanist features that Heidegger's philosophy of Being and Time had tried to invalidate or bypass. Beckett accomplishes Heidegger's negative program without needing the convoluted and regressive “jargon” (as Adorno had it) that accompanied his first ontology.

In spite of the repetitive nature of the texts and plays – famously, when it was first staged in Paris, *En attendant Godot* was described as a play in which nothing happens – *twice*, a description that keeps its purchase for *Happy Days*, Beckett never repeated himself in his successive creations. This attitude of constant innovation appeared as well when he directed his plays. His notebooks testify to an inquisitive and inventive spirit. Even with a play that ended up defining the hopeless hope of a whole generation, Beckett was not satisfied with the first staging when he returned to it twenty-two years later. One important sign is this: the 1975 Berlin production of *Godot* that Beckett directed lasted only two hours, whereas the Paris *Godot* lasted three hours. One can speak of “Godot 1” and “Godot 2,” as Thomas Cousineau has done.¹¹ We have direct proof of Beckett's obsessive work on the movements and stage props for his Berlin production of *Warten auf Godot* at the Schiller-Theater in Berlin in 1975. On January 1, 1975, he wrote to Jocelyn Herbert: “I have decided I must stop this theatre. The way I go about it means I can think of nothing else.”¹² But then he conceded that the result was “not too bad,”¹³ which, coming from Beckett, was the equivalent of a loud shout of triumph.

While directing, Beckett wanted to control the most minute details of his production and stylize the actors' very movements and diction. This controlling attitude – an attitude shared by most contemporary visual

artists who insist on creating specific effects, as Judith Wilkinson reminds us – has generated fruitful contradictions and revealing equivocations. A superb actress like Billie Whitelaw explained how urgently Beckett forced her to pay attention to the difference in length of time measured by two or three dots in her wonderful production of *Not-I*, whereas a French actor and director, Pierre Chabert, described the freedom allowed to him by Beckett, who did not mind the French actor's reluctance to deliver certain sections of *La Dernière Bande*, and accordingly deleted entire sections from the text.¹⁴

A similarly original and conflicted attitude can be observed when we look at Beckett's practice as a self-translator, here analyzed by Nadia Louar. At times, Beckett remained close to the first version, as when he translated his first trilogy of novels beginning with *Molly*. At times he took enormous liberties, as when he rewrote *Mercier et Camier* in English, giving a version of his novel that is less a translation than a new text. The English *Mercier and Camier* is one third shorter than the original; it is a toned down and minimalist version from which many delirious or bawdy passages have been excised; this corresponds to an "art of undoing" well analyzed in these pages by Dirk van Hulle. What stands out is the idea of rewriting a text more than a decade later as if it was a new staging of its effects, as he did with the 1975 *Godot*.

Beyond *Godot's* ethical and farcical critique of Heidegger, other reasons can be adduced for Beckett's durable appeal. Adorno gives us a valuable hint when he notes that Beckett's texts had been banned in Greece by the fascist junta of colonels despite their apparent absence of political meaning. This is a sure sign that Beckett would keep his political impact even when he did not explicitly engage with politics: "Greece's new tyrants knew why they banned Beckett's plays in which there is not a single political word."¹⁵ Beckett would exemplify a spirit of artistic resistance facing barbarism. Such resistance can be efficient even if it remains oblique, as Adorno states in *Negative Dialectics*: "Beckett gave us the only fitting reaction to the situation left by concentration camps – a situation never called by name, as if it were subject to an image ban. The world is, he says, like a concentration camp. Once he spoke of a lifelong death penalty. The only hope would be that nothing survives. But this too, he rejected. Out of the clash of contradictory theses there emerges the image of the Nothing taken as Something, an image that firmly anchors his poetry."¹⁶ In Adorno's reading, the particular negativity deployed by Beckett does not create a pure "nothing" because it retains historical and dialectical properties. Like Paul Celan,

but with different strategies, Beckett provides an answer to Adorno's quandary: how can one write poetry after Auschwitz? Paradoxically, Beckett's alleged "nihilism" ends up negating the nihilism of history. Beckett deploys his nihilism only when he aims at debunking the restoration of spurious values in which one cannot believe any longer.

When Adorno reads *Endgame*, what strikes him is the theme of the "abortion of death." Its pathos derives from the sense that even after all is over, one will have to go on. This is fitting in a post-holocaust situation, a time when the mechanization of death in extermination camps has increased the sense of trauma and the unspeakable. In this reading, Hamm's speeches do not betray a fear of death but a terror that "death could miscarry."¹⁷ The play has less to do with the Cold War or the possibility of an atomic bomb annihilating humanity than with Auschwitz, an event so traumatic that it cannot be named directly: "The violence of the unspeakable is mirrored in the fear of mentioning it. Beckett kept it nebulous. About what is incommensurable with experience as such one can only speak in euphemisms, the way one speaks in Germany of the murder of the Jews."¹⁸ Indeed, Adorno's formulations in *Aesthetic Theory* announce Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," the systematic reduction of human life to animal survival. Adorno writes that Beckett's novels "present the reduction of life to basic human relationships, that minimum of existence that subsists *in extremis*" (AT, 30). Beckett's main lesson is: "Il faut continuer," the conclusion of Beckett's *The Unnamable*, condenses this antinomy to its essence: that externally art appears impossible while immanently it must be pursued" (AT, 320). The modernist art of Beckett sticks to its own "plane of immanence" (as Gilles Deleuze would put it) just to show that Reason has become indistinguishable from Unreason.

However, Adorno may not have given us the last word on Beckett, as evinced by the work of Stan Douglas, which is discussed here by Judith Wilkinson. Douglas, a black Canadian artist born in 1960 and based in Vancouver, has worked with Beckett since 1988 when he organized an exhibition on the Teleplays at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Since then, he has produced films, photographs, reenactments, and videos based on Beckett's later work. "Vidéo," an 18-minute video loop from 2007, with a French cast, shot in a housing project near Paris, splices Beckett's *Film* with Franz Kafka's *Trial* and with Jean-Luc Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*. In this superb work, Douglas proposes a different view of Beckett's art, while pointing to its present relevance in the sense that it parts ways with a certain modernism.

Mixing Beckett, Kafka and Godard, Douglas means to go beyond the idea of the power of great texts or epoch-making films while rewriting them. Beckett is instrumental in an attempt at debunking a previous generation's trust in a monumentalized modernism, which is still discernible in Adorno's essays. Douglas rejects such "ahistoricity, closure and the affirmation of a masculine academic canon,"¹⁹ reminding us that what interested Beckett above all was a treatment of ignorance and impotence. Douglas's essay quotes a passage from Adorno that he finds problematic because all too emblematic of high modernist bias. Adorno speaks of Hamm, *Endgame's* main character as exposing "the lie concealed in saying 'I' and thereby exhibiting substantiality, whereas Adorno believed that the "I" has lost its "truth content" (Adorno is quoted by Douglas in *GPH*, 92–93). For Douglas, such an analysis calls up a post-war philosophy trying to recapture a Romantic subjectivity prevalent in Beethoven's times. It blames its inevitable demise on the rise of the "culture industry," understood as a mystification of late capitalism, a period when "humanity [. . .] has become an advertisement for inhumanity," as Adorno puts it. Douglas admits that such a judgment partly captures the ethos of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, but feels that Beckett moved on to produce work in different modes and media, totally unclassifiable work that troubled the division between spectators and actors, between prose, poetry, and play-acting. Beckett's importance for our times is thus equated with his being able to "articulat(e) the mendacity of 'they' as an equivalent to the 'lie concealed in saying 'I'" (*GPH*, 93). More radically, it means that Beckett has shifted "from describing to *inhabiting* situations." In the end, the point is that ". . . both audience and author are asked to admit their complicity in the visibility of the spectacle, and distanced judgments or interpretive 'explanation' becomes an uneasy pretense" (*GPH*, 93).

Douglas's metamorphosis of *Film* into *Vidéo* can appear disrespectful; however, the transformation is achieved knowingly in order to avoid the complacency of the critical theory promoted by Adorno in the name of Beckett. In parallel, Douglas avoids a facile recourse to identity politics and direct representations of oppressed or excluded minorities. Douglas rejects all at once a post-war existentialism, a postmodernist return to conflicting fictions, and the high modernist cultural critique in a bold artistic departure: "In contrast to Beckett's persistently insufficient first persons, the philosophical existentialists and the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school often claimed for themselves a rhetorical self through which they could speak as the last instance of a subjectivity soon to be extinct. An *ideal* self. A victim of history who speaks with a tacit nostalgia for some